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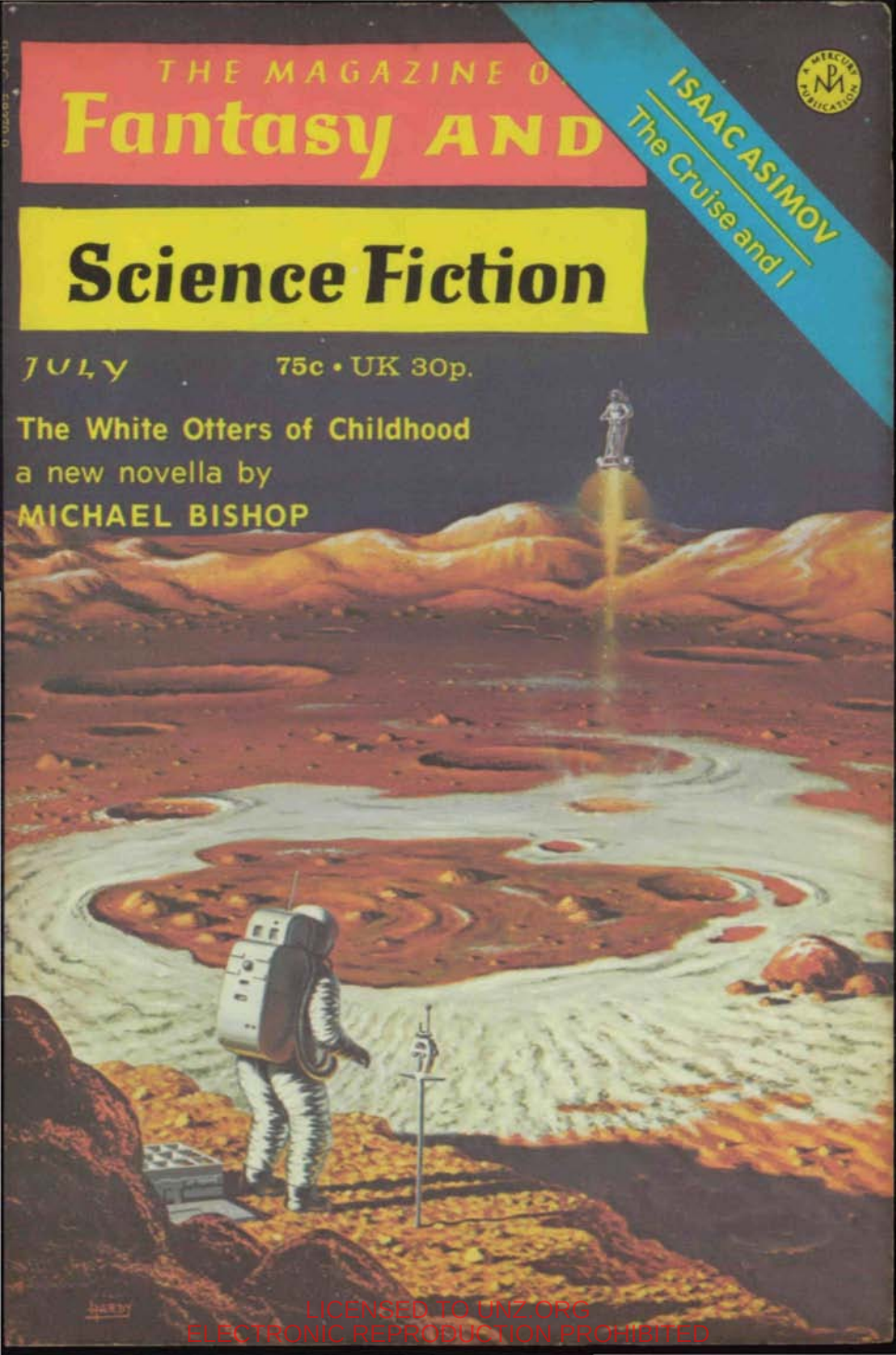
a new novella by
MICHAEL BISHOP



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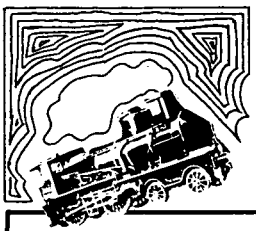

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It has been argued that the main business of sf is to look to the future, and that contemporary sf places too much emphasis on relevance to today's problems. There is some merit in this complaint, enough so that we are particularly pleased to offer this novella by a writer still relatively new to sf, a story that *does* create new societies, new problems, in a narrative that is both suspenseful and convincing.

The White Otters of Childhood

by MICHAEL BISHOP

i.

A wind came across the ocean, sweeping with it a pall of fine white ash. The ash fell into the sea and into the breakers. The breakers washed dead shrimp ashore with the driftwood. Then they washed up the whiting. The shark swam out to his deepest waters and brooded in the cold clean currents. He was very hungry that season.

— Walter M. Miller, Jr.

It is the Year of Our Lost Lord 5309. Or so we believe. From the sea we came, and to the sea we return.

I am chronicling both the upheavals of our ruling order here at Windfall Last and the upheavals of my own spirit. I have recourse to books. Although Mankind has been diminished to the two million who dwell on this island, all the knowledge of the past lies in the great Sunken Library at the bottom of Pretty Coal Sack, the bay on which our city fronts. After all, I have been the premier literary advisor to the Sunken Library and also one of the foremost counselors of the Navarch of Windfall Last. The Sunken Library contains manuscripts which not even the first ancients — those who initiated Holocaust A well over three thousand years ago — had at their disposal; many of these records, of course, we owe to the archeology and the persistence of the Parfects. As a consequence, books open to me almost of their own accord. I know several of the dialects that were spoken before the first holocaust and several of those that

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were spoken before the second rain of fire, neary fifteen hundred years later. I believe myself well versed in the ways of men.

Another fifteen hundred years have passed since Holocaust B, since the dispersal of the all-humbling ash, since the season of the shark's hunger. Sharks still thrive in the world — though, for the most part, we have forgotten their sleek flanks, their slashing undercut mouths, their piggish and brutal eyes. We have forgotten because the sharks themselves avoid the waters that surround our native (so to speak) island of Guardian's Loop, here in the Antilles. They probably scent that this final remnant of mankind dwells here in thrall to a bestiality more terrible than their own sharkishness.

But sharks still exist. In an open boat upon the sea I have had the privilege of seeing their dorsal fins slice through the sapphirine waters. Like blades through flesh.

My name is Markcrier Rains. I am the guilty conscience of a species which has twice tried to exterminate itself.

I am Markcrier Rains: poet, horseman, sailor, antiquarian, philologist, mystic, diplomat, natural historian, counselor, exile, lover, husband, dupe, widower, wretch, and finally revenger.

For forty-eight years I lived as if integrity were the sole means toward the scarcely attainable end of conquering the bright black canker in our collective souls. In this last year, my forty-ninth (a minor climacteric, if you believe in numerology), I shoved integrity arsewards and let that deep-seated soul-bruise ulcerate into something indisputably animal. My revenge was sweet; my remorse is as bittersweet as love.

And in this Year of Our Lost Lord 5309, I, Markcrier Rains, make my general confession to whatever deity the Parfects (who have inherited the earth) bequeath their innocent and untarnished spirits to. Not having fallen, the Parfects multiply on the continents, reign over every archipelago, rejoice in the bounty of the oceans. Since we have only Guardian's Loop, I confess to that veiled deity who has freed them from the Beast.

Therefore, read my confession:

I am going back now to the final December before the turn of the new century, back nine years to the last Christmas of that departed age. It was the Year of Our Lost Lord 5299.

I had just returned from a ten-month sojourn among the Parfects in Azteca Nueva, nearly two thousand miles across the Carib Sea, where these transcendental human beings permitted me

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to wander among them — just as we tolerate a pet dog to run underfoot at one of our sacramental bayside weddings. The Parfects, who enforce mankind's exile here on Guardian's Loop, the winged island, refuse to come among us; but occasionally they require detailed knowledge of our moods, our numbers, our intramural repressions. At these times they compel the Navarch to provide them with an envoy. On the past two such occasions, our Navarch, Fearing Serenos, selected me to represent the two million dying and doomed human beings of Windfall Last.

And gladly I performed the Navarch and the Parfects' will.

But on the Christmas of my second (and, I hoped, my last) return, I was a man consummately weary and dispirited. No human being can live among the Parfects for ten months without coming to feel himself a wholly contemptible creature, wanting in reason, purpose, and ultimate grace. The experience enervates and destroys. Even the wisest comes back to Guardian's Loop with the stench of his own humanity suffocating him and tainting his reunion with the old friends who seek to celebrate his return. Time becomes a necessity as great as food or shelter. One must recover. One must shake off the malaise produced by nearly three hundred days among the tall naked mutants who rule, without punishments or statutes, their own golden earth. For I was as an envoy to another planet, conscious every moment of the racial superiority of my hosts. At forty-one, I needed time to grow back into myself and my people. Those close to me understood and attempted to aid me in my recuperation.

I left Windfall Last. Fresh winds blew across the waters of Pretty Coal Sack, and ruffles of white lace spilled over the coral barrier in the bay. The sky shimmered with the bluish white of noon.

I rode horseback along the beach, spurring my horse with incredible ferocity toward our destination. Soon — even had I reined in the horse and turned him about — I could not have seen the cancer shape of globes and turrets and alluminum minarets that is the skyline with as much finality as if a fission bomb had fallen on the administrative sanctuary of Fearing Serenos himself. Galloping on horseback, the wind in my mouth, I rode free of mankind and its madnesses.

The horse belonged to Dr. Yves Prendick. I spurred him along the water's edge, now and again forcing the good doctor's docile beast away from the stretches of sand and broken shells and up into the moist

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varnished-green foliage that lay inland. I rode to keep a rendezvous with Prendick's twenty-six-year-old daughter. It was my fourth day back, Christmas Eve Day, and Prendick had give me the horse and suggested that I go mind Marina at the gutted sailing vessel that a hurricane had long ago swept up and deposited several hundred meters from the edge of the sea. The vessel was a unique landmark.

"Marina's camping there," he had told me, "studying the vegetation, the migratory water fowl."

"My God, Prendick, is she out there all alone?" Our centuries-old Navarchy had decreed no one could leave Windfall Last but the duly licensed and authorized (among whom Prendick and I and other counselors to Fearing Serenos counted ourselves), but enforcing such a decree among two million imperfect subjects presents special problems. I feared for Marina.

"She's all right, Mark. She has a pistol, and she knows how to use it. Take Paris, go down the beach and find her. Stay out there a while if you like. You need quiet company, a woman's voice."

And so I urged Paris, Prendick's dappled gelding, to aid me in seeking out Marina. In the glory of the white afternoon Paris' mane undulated like silken grass.

I found Marina when the sun had begun to fall a little toward the west. (Perhaps our first meeting after my return was a metaphor, who can say?) The old ship, the Galleon of the Hesperides as Marina and I had called it, lay wracked and rotting on the side of a small rise; and the sea had managed to cut a channel — a narrow channel— through the sand and then through the clamoring vegetation so that water sloshed and echoed in the caved-in opening beneath the galleon's forecastle. This same channel was fed in part from a fresh water runoff from the interior.

The ship dated from the 5100's; it had been built by the Parfects as an experiment in restoration, most likely, and then abandoned with their characteristic whimsicality to the elements. Somehow, its wood had not wholly decayed, in spite of the vegetation and the wet. The upper decks suffered under the liquorish weight of this vegetation; as a consequence, the Galleon of the Hesperides resembled a great basket of flowers: amazing varieties of cineraria grew there, as did acanthus, melilot, mallow, and fenugreek, plants one would not have anticipated growing in the West Indian tropics.

And it was on the upper deck that I saw Marina, dark, lithe, and inattentive to my approach, stooping over a bouquet of plush blue

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flowers. She was drawing in a sketchbook. She wore khaki shorts, a sort of sleeveless mesh-cloth hauberk, and, of course, a pistol. I halted Paris on the slope above the galleon and watched her with the eyes and heart of a man who knows himself too well. My eyes and heart ached. The wind was blowing from her to me, and it carried upon it the intimations of old perfumes.

Then Paris whinnied, drawing her attention. Paris danced sideways on the slope a little, and I had to pull him up with the reins.

Marina, below on the ship's deck, dropped her sketchbook, stood to her full height amid the blue flowers, and drew her pistol, all seemingly in a single motion. Her left arm came up to shield her eyes, and what I had forgotten during my ten months with the Parfects came back to me with heartbreaking cruelty.

Marina had been born with a left arm that terminated, just below the elbow, in a splayed paddle of flesh. It was a cruel and heartbreaking reminder of our ancestors' brinksmanship: the ash was always with us.

Whenever I remembered Marina, I remembered her without deformity. It was as if my mind unconsciously extrapolated from the tenderness of her nature and gave her the faultless physical beauty that she deserved. I *saw* the flat and slightly curved blade at the end of her arm, yes, but it had no genuine reality for me — only enough reality to make my eyes and heart ache in a way different from that provoked by simply beholding her face. Therefore, I suppose, that reality was enough.

Her father, a surgeon, might have softened the hard cruelty of her "hand" when she had come of age. But when she came of age, she would have none of his reshaping and plastisculpting. "I am as I am," she told her father. "I accept myself as I am. Besides, my seawing" — Fearing Serenos, our Navarch had been the first to call her deformed had and forearm a *seawing* — "serves to remind me of where we came from and what we've done to one another." Moreover, Serenos himself, whose face and hands bristled with a covering of atavistic fur, frowned on surgical remedies.

The result was that Prendick obeyed his daughter; he refrained from angering his hirsute and bestially ruthless lord.

And the further result was that Marina now shielded her eyes with the stump of her seawing and in her good hand held a pistol that was aimed at my heart. At her back, the sea sparkled under the white sun of noonday, laving the distant beach with foam. The pistol glinted blue.

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"Don't shoot," I called. "If you miss me, you might kill your father's horse. You know how your father is about his horses."

"Markcrier!" She smiled and holstered the gun. "Markcrier, come down here. Leave Paris on the hill."

"To run away? A fine Christmas gift for your father."

"Paris won't run away. If you get off his back and unbridle him, he'll graze and be happy for the chance."

I did as Marina bade me and then descended to the galleon. Boarding the run-aground vessel, I felt like a pirate who has fought for doubloons but who discovers that his captive's sea chests all contain roses. But I am a bad pirate; I was not disappointed. Marina had more the odor of roses about her than the metallic tang of old coins, and I kissed her. She pressed her lips against mine with no little ardor. The sea laved the beach with foam.

I was a little surprised at the degree of Marina's ardor.

We had known each other for almost her entire life, for I had met Yves Prendick in 5278 when he was elevated to the council and made the Navarch's personal surgeon. Marina had been five years old and I a precocious twenty. Even then, Serenos had trusted me more deeply than he did the fawning old magi twice and three times my age. I paid no attention to the children of fellow council members, however, and it was not until I returned from my first diplomatic excursion to the Parfects, eleven years later, that I became aware of Marina.

She was a self-possessed young lady, and our relationship developed into something subtle and significant — although I refused to acknowledge that it might be the prelude to marriage. The erotic aspect was not there, not even the first hints of a shy amorousness. Marina had other interests; so did I. When she turned twenty and I began to think about her as a possible wife, a political incident removed me from the council and the circle of my closest friends.

Fearing Serenos took umbrage at a semisardonic comment that I made in council session (a remark, I swear, which I cannot even recall) and ordered me to leave his chambers. I compounded this error by standing my ground and questioning the state of his mental health. How could so small a thing, I asked, provoke such a disproportionate response? Had the Navarch not loved me, I might have been killed.

Instead, I was exiled for almost fourteen months among the fishermen who live in the licensed colony of Barbos on Marigold Island, which lies to the south of Guardian's Loop. These men had

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been made fishermen and sent to Barbos because they were mutants, but, unlike most of us, mutants who offended either by their appearance or their mephitic odor, this last the result of unbalanced body chemistries. Many of them looked and smelled like rheumy-eyed beasts, but they treated me well; and I became one of them, working with boats and nets through the entirety of my exile. Serenos relented only when I had promised him, by messenger, to obey him in everything.

Upon my return I found that I had little time to think of Marina or of marriage. My duties, strangely enough, had multiplied. I handled countless administrative functions for the Navarch at the Palace of the Navarchy and spent many days at a time in the pressurized sacristies of the Sunken Library. At the bottom of Pretty Coal Sack, I worked with men who were carrying on the monastic tradition of preserving mankind's accumulated knowledge. Technically, regardless of professed affiliations, everyone on Guardian's Loop was either a monk or a nun under the supreme authority of our abbot, the Navarch. But the gradual — the miraculously gradual — crumbling of belief had turned Windfall Last into a secular community, rigidly stratified and stringently ruled. The monkish work in the Sunken Library went on only because the Parfects had built the library for us and demanded that we continue to transcribe and catalogue the intellectual achievements of man. Therefore, we did so. And Fearing Serenos kept me totally occcupied supervising these labors and innumerable others in the city itself.

Marina and I saw each other very seldom.

Eventually I protested that I would collapse from fatigue if not given a respite, a chance to communicate with other people. The Navarch reminded me of my vow. I kept silence ever after, until one day Serenos dropped his heavy arm over my shoulder and told me that after my next sojourn to Azteca Nueva, under the dead volcano, he would permit me to retire on full pension from his service — provided that he might call upon me now and again for advice and comradeship.

I agreed.

But to the day of my departure, not one whit did my work abate. I seldom saw anyone but those engaged in the same projects and activities as myself. I had no time for horsemanship, no time for poetry.

On the evening before I was to leave for the Parfects' homeland, however, Marina came secretly to my apartment/office and talked

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with me about other times. We talked for several hours, sipping rum from crystal glasses. When she was ready to go, Marina told me to take care and gave me a chaste girlish kiss on the nose: good-by to her second father.

Now she was kissing me with the welcoming kiss of a woman for her lover, and I returned the compliment, having realized it for a compliment, more devoutly, tonguing the warmth between her lips. At last we stopped. She stepped back and looked at me.

"Hello," I said. The sun raged small and white.

"Hello, Markcrier."

"I'm not used to such welcomes. The Navarch merely shook my hand; then he turned me over to the council members for thirty hours of debriefing. And in three days not one of those bastards kissed me."

"Not even father?"

"No. When we were done, he loaned me a horse and told me to get lost."

"And now you're lost?"

"Less so than I might have thought. Show me what you're doing, where you're camping. Does the old Galleon of the Hesperides still hold together well enough to provide a lady botanist shelter?" I pointed at the channel that the sea had cut beneath the ship. "That looks ominous."

"It's not," she said. "Come."

We crossed the deck. Our legs brushed past and animated the umbels, stalks, and gleaming leaves that grew from the accumulated soil on the deck's planking. The salt breeze reanimated this vegetation when we were by, and perfume was everywhere.

Down into the forecastle we went.

By the light that came through the planks overhead I could see that Marina had swept this area and made it her own. She had suspended a hammock across two corners of the room and stacked several books and sketch pads beside the hammock. But a section of the tilted floor near the vessel's bow had fallen in, and through the ragged opening one could look down and see the dark water that had undercut the galleon. The light was stronger here, and a million flowers grew in the clumped dirt on both sides of the encroaching rivulet. The water here was only minutely saline because rain had apparently flushed the sea back upon itself several times during the recent rainy season. As we stood looking into the flower pit, the hollow sound of water lapping at wood made primordial echoes in our ears. At last we turned back to the rustic boudoir.

"Very good," I said. "But where's your transportation?"

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"Oh, Hector. I gave him his head yesterday. He's up the beach most likely, nibbling at the green shoots that grow in one of the coastland swales."

"Yes, Hector. Good old Hector. Will he come back on his own?"

"With wet fetlocks and a matted chest. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. I'm hungry."

"Me too."

We sat cross-legged on the askew planking, and Marina fed me. We ate biscuits and dried fruit and sucked on the stems of a canelike plant that Marina assured me was not poisonous.

"Are you glad to be back?"

"Now I am."

"Markcrier?" She let my name hang above the sound of echoing water.

"Yes?"

"What's it like living among the Parfects for so long?"

"Like being five years old again. Like being continuously embarrassed for wetting the bed. Like being caught in the act of liberating the legs from an all-too-alive grasshopper. I don't know, Marina. The experience has no corollaries."

"How did they behave toward you? Were they contemptuous?"

"No, no, nothing like. They were kind but...*aloof*. *Aloof* is a perfect word to characterize them because even when they engaged me in conversation, some part of their intellect remained...disengaged, uncommitted. Simply because there was no need for them to commit this withheld part, I suppose. But they were always kind."

"Were they always" — her voice became humorously insinuative — "*naked?*"

"Always. I'm surprised you're interested."

"Why? Everyone has a prurient streak." Marina handed me another biscuit and spat out a piece of fiber from the plant stem she had been sucking on. "What I really want to know is, did they go naked all year? Even when it was cold?"

"Every day, rain or shine."

"How could they?"

"No morals," I said.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean, how could they tolerate the cold?"

"I don't know. It never seemed to bother them."

"And you? Did you —?" She stopped.

"Go naked?"

"Yes."

"You're asking that of me? A member of the Navarch's council?"

"Yes. Did you?"

"No," I said. "They never expected that of me. Besides, the disparity between my own physique and the Parfects' would have been painful to me. No prepubescent lad ever likes to shower with the big boys."

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"Oh, I see. The matter was not simply physical, but sexual as well."

"No, no."

"Well, then, what are they like?"

"I don't know. Like us, but more elegant."

"*Elegant* is an equivocator's word, a weak word. Markcrier, you're trying to put me off; you're trying to tease me."

"I'm not. Besides, your curiosity is too much for me. And the word *elegant* says it all; it encapsulates the essence of the Parfects. You're teetering on an abyss, young woman, when you correct a sometimes poet on his diction."

"Very sorry, I'm sure. But I want to know what they're like."

"They're prigs, if you want the truth. They make love openly, they refrain from sermonizing, they speak whatever they feel — but somehow, don't ask me to explain it, they're still prigs. For nine months and two weeks of the time that I spent in the shadow of Popocatepetl, I was bored. My bones ached with ennui."

"I don't believe you."

"After the first two weeks they scarcely paid me any heed. And when they did, their kindness ran over me like cane sap."

"Did you write poetry, then? In all that time you were alone?"

"No."

"Why not? You used to complain of a lack of time."

"Marina, poetry is a spiritual need. Many of us in Windfall Last turned to poetry when we lost faith in the mythologies of our still-dying church. But it's impossible to express the spirit when the spirit is submerged, and among the Parfects I had no more divinity in me than does a teredo, a wood-burrowing shipworm. I couldn't write a line."

"Then you really believe they're creatures without original sin?"

"Marina, I deny original sin — but I acknowledge that man is carnivorous and cannibalistic, spiritually so."

"But the Parfects are different; you've already said that."

"Different, yes. They lack the more obvious human vices, the ones that are ours by way of evolutionary bequest. Doubtless, they have vices of their own."

"Such as?"

"You ask painfully pointed questions, don't you?"

"Yes. What sort of vices?"

I had to pause. The ship seemed to creak with old tethers and old strains, the seawrack of yesterday. At last I suggested, "How about the vice of being insupportably boring?"

Marina laughed, unconsciously rubbed her seawing with her good

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right hand, tapped her bare feet on the rough planking. I grinned at her. In a way, she had made me go through my second debriefing in four days, and I think she realized that I couldn't talk about the Parfects any longer without decorating the account with an uncontrolled and perhaps sub-hysterical flippancy. She must have sensed my precarious mental state. At any rate, she laughed at me without malice and asked no more questions about my mainland stay.

We finished our makeshift meal and went down to the beach.

The whole of mankind on two islands in the Carib Sea. That thought kept bubbling in my head even as I held Marina's hand and walked with her along the water's edge. Incongruous. Wasn't every man a piece of the continent, a part of the main? It seemed not — not any more — in spite of what the long-dead dean of St. Paul's had once written.

Paris being content with his grazing, we were going up the beach to find Hector; as we walked, Marina did not permit me to dwell on the metaphysics of mankind's general exile.

She said, "You're done with the council now, aren't you? Now that you're back from the mainland, you'll be given a pension and time to do what you want. Isn't that so, Markcrier?"

"So that accounts for my welcome. You're interested in my money."

"It's true, then?"

"I don't know yet. Serenos hasn't mentioned the matter since my return. How did you happen to know about it?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Your father?"

She nodded. "I ask only because I want it to be true. For your sake, Markcrier — not because the matter might in some way concern me."

I had nothing to say to that. The sea came up and covered our feet, then slid back down the wetted shingles as if unable to obtain purchase. I, too, was barefoot now, and I wondered how many bare feet and how many beaches this one same wave throughout the world had laved, this one same wave since Troy.

"My father and I have seen Fearing Serenos many times since your departure. We've been in his company often, Markcrier."

I looked at her. "Why?"

"Invitations. Always invitations."

"But just for you and your father. Never for Melantha? Never for your mother also?"

"Never."

I halted her and held her shoulders. "A transparent arrangement."

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"Yes," she said. "But in the last two months I've been able to put him off. He's been busy, and I've spent a great deal of time sketching and collecting — with the Galleon of the Hesperides as my base."

"Has the Navarch mentioned marriage to you or your father?"

"No. That would be a loss of face, I suppose. He wants the first word to come from us, from either father or me."

"Thank God for vainglorious scruple."

We looked at each other but said nothing. There was no need. We resumed walking, holding hands.

Finally we left the beach and clambered into the green underbrush. Marina ran ahead. I followed. We found Hector, a huge brown beast just as matted as Marina had said he would be, in a clearing beside a pond. His lips worked methodically on the greenness in his mouth, and his eyes unconcernedly blinked. Marina scratched him on the plane of his forehead and behind his ears. After drinking from the pond ourselves, we rode Hector back to the Galleon of the Hesperides. Although he wore no bridle, Hector responded to the pressure of Marina's knees and carried us surely home.

We arrived at four or five in the afternoon. The white blister of the sun had fallen further toward the westward sea, and the light had thinned to a frightening paleness.

We released Hector at the foot of the rise upon which Paris still grazed, and the heavy mud-and-salt-encrusted creature plodded up the hillside to join his stablemate. Paris, glad for the company, tossed his mane, stomped, whinnied. Two convivial geldings at the top of the world, they murmured anecdotes to each other out of tirelessly working lips.

"Come on," I said to Marina.

"Where. We're home."

"Into the broken section of hull — where the flowers are."

She did not protest. She followed me. We waded into the long narrow channel that snaked up the beach from the sea; we splashed through this ankle-deep water toward the ship. At the hull's sea-ripped portal we had to duck our heads, but we passed through it without scraping flesh, without having to crawl. Inside, the smell of rotting wood, tempered by the smell of mallow and tropic rose, was not unpleasant. Though even paler here, the afternoon light ceased to frighten me; instead it cast a warm white haze over the groined interior walls, over the clover that sprang from the mud embankments on both sides of the rivulet. Marina and I faced each other. We might have been in a ballroom, so spacious and warm

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seemed the foreward bilge of the Galleon of the Hesperides.

"We could have stayed outside," Marina said, not rebuking me. "I've seen no one on the beaches in all the time I've been camping and working here."

"I didn't want it that way. I wanted shelter and just you with me in the closeness of that shelter."

"Those things are yours, Markcrier."

I took her face in my hands and kissed her. We moved out of the rivulet, still kissing, and went down on our knees on one of the clovered embankments, went down together with infinite mansuetude and care. The sea exhorted us. Kneeling face to face, we unclothed each other. I removed the sleeveless hauberk from her shoulders and let the garment crumple to the ground behind her. She unlaced my tunic, she slipped it away from me, she pressed one perfect hand against my chest. Her eyes would not remove from mine.

"A child, Markcrier, are you afraid of a child?"

"No," I said. I had no time to say anything else.

"I'm not afraid of a child, even if we never married. But if it would displease you, the thought of my deformity being passed on; if you were to think me immoral for taking that chance —"

"There'll be no child," I said.

She looked at me expectantly, curiously, awaiting an explanation.

"There'll be no child because it isn't given to me to create one, Marina. We have both been visited by the ash, but my punishment is in some ways the crueler: sterility. Invisible but insidious."

After a moment she said, "Are you certain?"

"I'm forty-one years old." And I had some understanding of the medusa of man's heart. "Does it make a difference to you?"

She leaned forward. She kissed me briefly. "No. I would have borne your children gladly, but had they been...*wrong*, somehow like me...I would have hated myself for making them suffer."

I covered her mouth with my own. Then we broke apart and clumsily finished removing our clothes. Although we were both adults and forgave each other for behing human, our clumsiness embarrassed us. Marina turned aside and smoothed out her wrinkled hauberk for a resting place. This delay also confused us, but we embraced again and eased our naked bodies together — eased ourselves backwards onto Marina's garment until our slow passion had deafened us to both our own breathing and the easy lapping of water against wood.

Without even thinking to be so, I was slow and easefully rhythmic;

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Marina ran a silken hand over the small of my back while her seawing — her ash-given seawing — clasped my flank. When I came, we were not together; but Marina held me as if I were part of her, and we lay without uncoupling for the duration of the afternoon's pale light.

The vulva smell of the sea intensified as the light failed, and soon we slept in each other's arms in a bed partaking of (as it necessarily must) the smells of the sea's basins.

The next day was Christmas. We saw white otters cavorting on the sand.

ii.

There is no life which does not violate the injunction "Be not anxious." That is the tragedy of human sin. It is the tragedy of man who is dependent upon God, but seeks to make himself independent and self-sufficing.

— Reinhold Niebuhr

We were married on the first day of the new century.

The ceremony took place on the bay of Pretty Coal Sack, and the sky pulsed with the blue-white urgency of an adder's eyes. The breezes blew soft; the sails of the vessels in the harbor puffed out with their airy pregnancies.

And although the Navarch was present among the guests, he did not preside over our brief nuptials as we had asked him to do. Instead, after the recitation of vows, he spoke with me in an abstracted manner for a few minutes and then kissed Marina on the cheek and wished her happiness. Marina tried to draw him out; she told him of the white otters we had seen and teased him about his overdone wedding-day solemnity. "This isn't a wake," she said. "You're permitted to smile." "Oh, I smile, Marina, I smile in my own inward way." Then he bowed and left us. For the next twenty minutes he conferred with two elderly council members who happened to be standing on the periphery of the circle of our guests.

Between sips of rum and perfunctory exchanges of banter, I could not help glancing at him. His presence compelled attention. Moreover, Serenos had made a point of not speaking to Yves Prendick at all; that fact, along with his conspiratorial conference with my two former colleagues, cast a shadow over everything. I could not convince myself that these three venerable men were discussing only Windfall Last's innumerable social problems.

As a consequence, the seven riflemen who had come for the purpose of protecting the Navarch began to look like hired assassins. Positioned on two sections of the stone wall that partially enclosed the bayside altar, these men

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guarded all of us from assault with hunched, seemingly stupid backs. One or two of them stared down with set mouths. For that year had been notable for the number of bloody confrontations between the Navarch's Gendarmerie and the disorganized but sometimes murderous packs of prol-fauves that had taken to roaming the harbor area. When Serenos left, however, he designated only two of these riflemen to remain behind as our protection against the prol-fauves. I did not greatly fear these debased human creatures, but the Navarch's parsimonious allotment of gendarmes amounted to a not-to-be-ignored expression of displeasure. And the displeasure of Fearing Serenos frightened me more than any rampant horde of prol-fauves.

I had not expected such curtness from the Navarch. On the day after Christmas I had gone to him and reminded him of his promise of releasing me from formal government service. He had acknowledged both his promise and his unaltered intent to honor that promise.

"When, m'Lord?" I had asked.

"Immediately. But for a single lapse, Markcrier, you have served me well for more than twenty years — twice among the mongrel Parfects. You deserve whatever I can grant you: pension, comfort, access to my person, permanent status as a member of the Navarchy."

"And marriage if I wish?"

"Marriage," he said slowly, the hair on his cheek planes rippling with an involuntary grimace, "if you wish." He looked at me. "I can tell that you've settled on someone, that you're asking my permission. Isn't that so, Markcrier?"

"Yes, m'Lord."

"And the woman is Marina Prendick. That's so, too, isn't it?"

I admitted what he had already guessed.

Serenos paced the chamber, his brutal hands clasped in front of him. I realized that the delicate brindle fur on the man's face, the fur concealing everything but his hard rat's eyes, made it impossible to determine his age. How old was he? How long had he ruled in Windfall Last before I became a member of his privileged council?

Serenos stopped pacing. He made an unhappy gesture with one of those brutal hands. "You have my permission, Markcrier — but only because it is you who have asked. I set one condition. Will you hear it?"

No alternative existed. "I will hear it, Navarch."

"You are still a young man. One day I will call upon you to perform an additional service to Windfall Last. When that day comes, you will do as I ask."

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"A legitimate service to the people, Navarch?" My question very nearly violated propriety, the distance between servant and lord. But I did not wish to be trapped by a man whose motives I did not trust.

"I would ask you no other kind," he said sharply. "A legitimate service to your people. Agreed?"

"Yes, Navarch."

And at that, Fearing Serenos had smiled like a water spaniel lolling its tongue. My fears were put to rest, for the Navarch smiled only when genuinely pleased, never as a means of expressing contempt or sarcasm. Therefore, I believed that no stigma would attach to my marriage with Marina, that the dangers we had imagined were indeed wholly imaginary ones. It is true that Serenos declined my invitation to preside at the wedding, but he had done so with self-effacing charm, pleading that he had long since forgotten the sequence of the rites and arguing that he did not choose to embarrass us with his clumsiness. I had expected this explanation and departed from his chambers a happy man.

Then, on the day of the wedding, the first day of the new century, I stood on the harbor flagstones and watched Serenos climb the stone steps that would lead him to the administrative cluster of Windfall Last and the hilltop battlements of the Palace of the Navarchy. Five brightly uniformed riflemen accompanied him; two remained behind.

Although no one but Marina's father and I seemed to realize it, we had been reprimanded. I knew that a reckoning would come. I walked among our many guests, sipped rum, ate orange slices, talked — but all the while I tried to anticipate the outward form that the Navarch's displeasure would take. No man, I supposed, deserved to live out his life in complete freedom from anxiety (nature did not ordain man for insouciance), but neither should a man have to contend daily with arbitrary and featureless threats to his sanity. The two riflemen on the harbor parapet became symbols of a doom over which neither Yves Prendick nor I had any control. At that moment, an attack by the prol-fauves would have been preferable to the uncertainty that Serenos had bred in us — even with only two members of the Gendarmerie on the wall as our defenders.

In my distraction I began staring out to sea, wondering in which waters the rapacious sharks had attempted to slake their eternal hunger. I must have appeared forbidding company, for no one disturbed me.

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That afternoon Marina and I returned to the Galleon of the Hesperides. We remained there a week. We did not see the white otters again, but no one came out from Windfall Last to summon us back. Still, I expected a messenger from the Navarch to arrive at any moment (sometimes I imagined an entire contingent of armed guards) to escort us, under arrest, back to the city. The white Carib sun could not burn away these fears, and Marina became aware of my uneasiness. I had to tell her what I feared. She accepted my account with a sort of facetious stoicism and kissed me. Our week drew to an end. Much to my surprise, no one murdered us in our sleep.

We returned to Windfall Last and took up residence in a climbing free-form structure on Dr. Prendick's estate, The Orchard. Grass and trees surrounded us, and our white dwelling, shaped from a plastic foam that had dried to the graininess of stucco, surrounded the bole of a giant magnolia palm. The Parfects had created both tree and house long before mankind's enforced removal to the island, just as they had built almost everything else on Guardian's Loop.

Like the tentacled devilfish that take over the shelters of other departed sea creatures, Marina and I moved into this sinuously magnificent dwelling. Her father called it Python's Keep. In our first years there, we seldom used that name, but the house did sheathe us as comfortably as its latest unshedded skin contains a serpent.

I continued to wait. We were left alone. Marina sketched, painted watercolors, worked at planting a vegetable garden in a sunlit section of the lawn. I made excursions to the Sunken Library. There I gathered material for a comparative literary history of the most interesting periods prior to Holocaust A. In the evenings we sometimes visited with Marina's parents. Yves told me a little of what was going on in the council sessions; Melantha gossiped with her daughter as if there were no difference in age at all. I also wrote poetry, much of it as good as any I had ever written. And, of course, Marina and I fell into the not entirely unpleasant routines of people who are married. No children came from our love, but we had expected none.

Nevertheless, I continued to wait. Not for children, but for the reckoning I was sure must come.

Occasionally I saw the Navarch. He inquired about my work, gave his best to Marina, scrupulously avoided mentioning the affairs of Windfall Last. Although I continued to wait for the inevitable reckoning, my memory fogged. I could not explain to myself the

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source of my nagging, subliminal anxiety. Where had it come from?

The years went by. Nothing occurred to suggest that Fearing Serenos had worked out his delayed wrath against us. Had Marina and I been spared? Did the Navarch possess both a conscience and a forgiving nature?

Other occurrences led me to discard these hopes as vain ones.

In 5306 the Gendarmerie went into the streets on administrative command. On the first day they slaughtered a pack of prol-fauves; the fighting (riflemen against rock throwers, bottle wielders, and slingshot artists) lasted three hours and resulted in the deaths of eighty-two illiterate, shambling yahoos, not one of whom died understanding his predicament. There was blood from this engagement on the harbor flagstones for nearly a year, red-brown stains that gradually faded under the natural corrosives of sea water and pigeon crap. On the following days the Gendarmerie killed at a less spectacular rate; but riding horseback along the waterfront and shooting any adult male who had the twin credentials of raggedness and glassy-eyed idiocy, they managed to bag thirty or forty more. Eventually, even the most cretinous of the prol-fauves learned to stay away from the areas of patrol; and the once-vicious packs, never truly cohesive except in situations of unthinking rampage, disintegrated into a scattering of frightened, pitiable half-men. Taking pity, the Gendarmerie apprehended these stragglers instead of shooting them.

Public executions took place. In order to conserve rifle and small-arms ammunition (which the government manufactured on a limited scale for its own use), Serenos decreed that the captured prol-fauves would suffer decapitation. On several scaffolds erected at bayside, the blade fell more times than anyone but the sadists on the Navarch's council desired to count. Crowds oohed at each new delicious dramatization, while the resultant gore drew another sort of devotee — carrion flies that iridesced in blue-green clusters over the damp scaffolds.

The majority of the population of Windfall Last accepted these tactics with delight and approval. Had not the Navarch dealt decisively with a troublesome social menace? This delight and approval continued unabated even when the Gendarmerie began mounting the severed heads on spikes and positioning the spikes at four-meter intervals along the harbor wall.

I recalled that I had once mentioned to Serenos the Elizabethan practice of ornamenting London Bridge in a like manner. How often I discovered that I had

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indirectly abetted the man's barbarism. This knowledge made me suffer uncannily.

Marina and I spent almost all our time at The Orchard. Python's Keep was secure, removed, isolated. Neither of us wished to go into Windfall Last and witness the grotesque reality of men's heads impaled on iron stakes, staring inland with hideous incomprehension. Too, I did not care to be reminded of my own failure to intervene in some way — or of the possible consequences of any such intervention. After all, the Navarch no doubt continued to believe that I had a debt outstanding, a debt he had consciously deferred the collection of. My anxiety was already too great to risk incurring another debt. In these ways I rationalized my refusals to act.

In 5307 the only word I had of the Navarch came to me through Yves Prendick, who had maintained his status both as Serenos' physician and as a member of the council of the Navarchy. Prendick said that Serenos never mentioned either Marina or me and that the old headchopper's health could be characterized by the single word *excellent*. Like me, Prendick did not know how old the Navarch was: it seemed that he had ruled Windfall Last forever and that we would be foolish to count on his dying very soon.

About this time Marina and I noted a strange thing about her father. Though he frequently marveled at the physical condition of his principal patient, he began to spend an untoward amount of time either tending to him or working in the theater of surgery where he (Prendick) had trained as a young man. Prendick did not talk about these long sessions away from The Orchard, except to deny that Serenos was ill. "I'm engaged in some difficult experimentation which I've undertaken upon the Navarch's orders. I can't say any more. I won't." Having said this, he would invariably fall into silence or stride out of the room. In three months' time he grew irritable, wheyfaced, and abstracted. And I, in turn, grew as suspicious of Marina's father as a man may be of someone he still respects and loves. What had happened to Prendick? What was he about? What did he mean by "difficult experimentation"?

Obsessed with these questions and a nebulous fear almost eight years old, I concluded that Prendick would be the Navarch's instrument of revenge. Fearing Serenos had forced Marina's father to an insidious betrayal. By what means he had done so, I could not even guess.

But I was wrong. The Navarch required no helpmates beyond his

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own cunning and faithlessness. Although I did not then understand this fact, the day of reckoning was fast approaching.

On the anniversary of my wedding, New Year's Day, 5308, I received word at Python's Keep that His Excellency Fearing Serenos desired my presence in the chambers of the Navarchy in the newly renovated administrative palace. At once. Without delay. This rococo complex of turrets and arches overlooked the entire city of Windfall Last from a hill that the Parfects had raised inland from the bay, and I knew that it would take me almost twenty minutes to reach the pălace from Dr. Prendick's outlying estate. By then it would be noon, the precise hour that Marina and I had exchanged our vows.

Now that the anticipated moment had actually come, I found myself oddly composed: numbness and resignation, resignation and numbness. Not even Marina's tears could penetrate the shell of plastic indifference into which I withdrew. We had had seven complete years together, Marina and I. How much more could two ephemeral, parasitic creatures expect? The earth was not made for man, but we had fooled it for seven fruitful years.

I should have taken Prendick's autocart, but I did not. Knowing that my journey would take nearly an hour longer, I saddled Hector, now a tired, plodding beast, and left The Orchard on horsebacck. The white sun shimmered overhead, and in my numbness I almost forgot that I carried neither pistol nor rifle. What for? To be torn apart by renegade prol-fauves before reaching the Navarch's chambers would have been an exquisite irony.

And Serenos did not appreciate irony.

Then let it befall, I prayed to no one in particular.

The Navarch's private chambers breathed with the vegetable moistness of a garden. Ushered into this closed hothouse over a thick scarlet carpet, I was made giddy with the richness of the air. Vines tumbled down the walls, rough stone showed behind the vines, the upper portion of a tree grew through the floor in one leafy corner. I saw tapestries hanging free from two interior doorways. I saw also a large glass aquarium occupying a third of the wall opposite me. Golden fish swam through the fern-crowded waters there — golden fish, all of them golden. (*But where were the silver-grey sharks: the stupid dogfish with their evil porcine eyes?*) And then I saw the gleaming mahogany-red surface of the Navarch's desk and, behind it, the illustrious person of Fearing

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Serenos himself. I had not seen him face to face in over two years.

"You're late, Markcrier," he said. "Approach."

I approached. There was not a chair other than the Navarch's in the room. I stood before the man and waited for some word from him. In no hurry to satisfy my numb curiosity, he leaned back and extended his arms inside the loose sleeves of the silken, canary-yellow robe that bore the emblem of his office — a stylized ship in scarlet thread — over his left breast. Then he interlaced his fingers, dropped his hands to his lap, and examined me as if I were an exotic artifact washed ashore from Azteca Nueva. The image of a mischievous baboon who has just raided the wardrobe of a prince played before my eyes. I had to fight the image down.

"It's good to see you, Markcrier. It's good to know that you're a man who honors his commitments — even if he does so tardily."

"I obey my Navarch, m'Lord."

"In everything?"

"In everything that a man can reasonably be expected to obey."

His voice took on a husky resonance. "You equivocate."

I held my tongue.

"You do remember, don't you, M. Rains, the commitment that you made to me seven years ago? The promise that you gave me virtually on the eve of your wedding?"

"I've been unable to forget."

"Yes, I know. The strain has aged you, Markcrier."

I told him what his appearance told me. "You, m'Lord, have not changed. You've borne the troubles of these last several years without alteration."

The Navarch nodded. "Quite true." He looked directly at me. "But even though you've aged, Markcrier, you've not suffered. Your existence on Guardian's Loop has been an idyllic one. Leisure in which to write. A home well removed from two million citizens less fortunate than yourself. And" — he paused for a moment — "a beautiful wife."

I wanted to sit down. My hands had begun to sweat, and this allusion to Marina chipped a little of the enamel off my shell of indifference. I said, "No, I've not suffered."

"Indeed you haven't. But, M. Rains, you have earned all the things I've just mentioned, and no one begrudges you."

"That pleases me, Navarch."

"However, one cannot expect to live out his entire lifetime on exhausted past earnings. Don't you agree?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said, not understanding.

"Just as I told you to expect. I now want you to perform another service for Windfall Last."

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"I want to sit down," I said. It took three or four awkward minutes, during which time Serenos studied me with arrogant dispassion, but someone finally brought in a chair. I sat down. The fish in the aquarium hovered seemingly just out of reach; I felt that I was swimming among them.

"What is it you want me to do?" I asked when we were again alone.

"Go among the Parfects again. They no longer wish to wait a decade between visits from our envoys. Some urgency compels them."

I gripped the sides of my chair, digging my nails into the wood.

"I ask you," Fearing Serenos continued, "because you are still not an old man and because your knowledge of the Parfects is so much more complete than that possessed by any of the rest of us." The voice was insultingly oily, as if the Navarch already knew what my answer would be.

"No," I said. "You have no right to ask that of me."

"I may ask of you anything I like. Further, I may compel you to perform whatever I ask. Do you understand that, M. Rains?"

I spoke out of a profound numbness, a numbness entirely independent of the words that fell from my mouth. "No, m'Lord. You may not compel me in this."

"Indeed?"

"No, m'Lord."

"But I could, Markcrier. I could do so quite easily." His jowls reminded me of those of a large brindle dog. "Do you know how?"

"I have seen the heads on the spikes."

"Prol-fauves, every one. They have nothing to do with you, Markcrier."

"Nevertheless, I have something to do with them. Even should you threaten me with tortures, Navarch, I will not go among the Parfects again. You yourself pledged to spare me from that possibility seven years ago."

"*No* is your final answer, then?"

"I have no hesitation in rejecting to perform a service that you have no right to ask of me."

"You insist on an extremely limited construction of what my rights consist of, M. Rains. In reality, no limits exist. At this very moment I could kill you without qualm or compunction, simply for refusing me. But I won't. You've already failed the major test of your loyalty to me — when I have given you everything that a man requires for his comfort."

Fearing Serenos stood up and walked in his sweeping yellow robes over the scarlet carpet to the tree that grew up through the floor. His hand touched something on the wall, and the ceiling opened like a

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giant Venetian blind — a blind with invisible louvers. White light sifted down through the skylight and paled the climbing foliage.

Serenos said, "I will give you the opportunity of performing a humbler mission so that you may both keep your word and repay me for maintaining you in your present comfort. Will you undertake this second mission, as humble as it is, without asking me another question?"

"Will it benefit Windfall Last?"

"Not another question!" he roared, shaking a fist. He paced for a full minute, enraged. Then he calmed and stared at me again. "Answer me, Markcrier: Will you do what I ask of you or not? Be quick."

I stood up. I no longer had the bravado to deny one of the Navarch's commands. Even if the trap were about to snap shut on me, the trap I had anticipated for so long, I could say nothing but what he expected. "Yes, I'll accomplish your *humble* mission for you. What is it?"

"A visit to some old friends."

Once again, the specter of exile. I had an instantaneous understanding of who my "old friends" were. My hands trembled.

"The fishermen on Marigold," Serenos said by way of needless explanation. "The ones you lived with for fourteen months."

"How long will I visit them this time?"

Serenos laughed. "Don't fear me, Markcrier. As I said, this is a humble mission and it will require you to be away from your home and wife only a very brief time. A humble mission. You earn it by your forfeiture of the more important one." He laughed again, darkly.

"Who, then, will you send to the Parfects?"

"Now, now, M. Rains, don't begin to worry about the opportunity you've rejected. I imagine I can put the Parfects off a bit."

"Well, then, what am I to accomplish on Marigold Island?"

"There is an old man there whom you know quite well, I should think. An old fisherman. His name is Huerta." Serenos paused for my response.

"I know him," I said.

"Very good. Greet this man for me, tell him that I am lifting the interdict on his colony so that those who wish to return to Windfall Last may do so. Then bring him back with you. If it's possible, I will speak to him as one ruler to another." The Navarch crossed the carpet and stood directly in front of me. I had forgotten how tall the man was. He was of a height with the Parfects of smaller stature. "Can you accomplish this humble task for me, Markcrier?"

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"Yes, m'Lord."

"Then do so. A ship will be waiting for you in the morning. Go to the Navarch's quay at sunrise." He turned his back on me and looked at the monstrously magnified fish in his aquarium.

"Yes, m'Lord."

And with his back still to me he said, "I'll never ask anything of you again, Markcrier."

On that cryptic note I went out.

In the morning I sailed to the fisherman's colony of Barbos on Marigold Island. Mankind still owned ships, still went out on the waters in slim vessels whose narrow bodies imaged the form of woman. Marina was such a vessel, bearing the burdens of our shared nights and loving with me against death. A ship was love, a woman was love. And it may be that the Parfects' knowledge of this fact had persuaded them to grant us movement on the seas, for they had denied us land vehicles and flying machines (with the exception of small balsa wood gliders and battery-powered carts). In the early days of the Navarchy on Guardian's Loop, many sailors had hoped to use their ships as means of escaping the power of men such as Fearing Serenos. But there was no place to go. The Parfects would not permit these ships to make harbor anywhere in the world but at Windfall Last. Therefore, every vessel that departed port either returned home again or died the pelagic death of creatures infinitely older than man. Still, the sea continued to exist for our love, and ships moved over it, ships that imaged the form of woman.

Huerta greeted me warmly. He remembered my fourteen-months' exile on Marigold Island. And I remembered him.

He was an incredibly ugly old man with bandy legs and a chin that was joined by both bone and flesh to his sternum. He had virtually no neck and walked with his shoulders thrown exaggeratedly back in order to compensate for the earth-locked angle of his head and eyes. His rib cage jutted. His heavy mouth had been pressed into an obligatory pout. Fortunately, he smelled only of salt water and fish oil, not of the bile and sulfur of an imbalanced body chemistry.

Standing on the beach with Huerta triggered a series of remarkable memories, pictures of Huerta's people fifteen years ago and of a bewildered young council member dirtying his hands with physical labor, suffering the stench and closeness of a variety of man he had not entirely believed in. Now I was back. But this time for only three days.

After entertaining me with clumsy feasts and sentimental trips to other encampments, Huerta at

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last delegated his authority to a one-eyed man of twenty or so (where there should have been another eye, there was not even a socket — only smooth unblemished flesh); and we departed Marigold Island on the afternoon of the third day.

At dusk on the homeward voyage I looked over the starboard railing and thought I saw the triangular caudal fins of four or five small sharks. But the turquoise glinting of the sea made perception difficult, and no one stood beside me to corroborate what I had seen. The last time I had sighted sharks (which was also the first and only time they had performed their cruel ballet for me), Huerta and I had been out together in his wooden skiff. Fifteen years ago. Could it be that these sleek fishes were returning to the waters of man? For no reason at all I thought of Fearing Serenos. When the sun finally set, bloodying the sea with its last light, I suffered a profound depression and went below decks to seek company.

We reached Windfall Last between midnight and dawn — I had no notion of the exact time. Huerta was taken from me by three uniformed men in cloaks. They had been waiting since the previous noon, they said, and assured me that Huerta would reach the Palace of the Navarchy safely. A bed awaited him, and the old man would have an audience with Serenos in the morning. I said good-by to my old friend and declined the gendarmes' invitation to go with them to the Palace. I had decided to sleep in my own bed, beside Marina.

Since we had arrived at such an awkward hour, however, I had no transportation back to Python's Keep. Nevertheless, I did not go aboard again, but paced beside the ship's black, impassive hull. The stars scoured fuzzy halos into the face of the night, and my feet, as I walked, made echoing *tlaks* on the flagstones.

Grotesque in the starlight, the impaled heads of the latest batch of slaughtered prol-fauves stretched away from me down both directions of the harbor wall. I tried not to look at them.

I had almost resolved to wake somebody up (perhaps even the Navarch himself, although that would have required a long walk and I had already declined one invitation to stay in the Palace) when a horse-drawn wagon came rattling down the street. This wagon, as it happened, belonged to the shipmaster, a taciturn man who had refused to say more than four words to me on our entire voyage. He came down the plank from his vessel at almost the same moment that the wagon ceased its wooden

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moanings; and I asked, then importuned, and then reluctantly ordered the man to give me passage home. Python's Keep was some distance out of his way, and he refused to behave as if he were not annoyed. He disapproved of the Navarch's lifting of the interdict, he resented me, and he thought Huerta (if I correctly interpreted his avoidance of the fisherman aboard ship) the vilest and most stomach-souring creature he had ever encountered. Strangely enough, the shipmaster's own wagoner looked himself to be a kind of living abortion — he had no arms and no tongue and smelled of dried excrement. He drove the wagon by manipulating the reins with his bare feet.

When Dr. Prendick's estate, The Orchard, at last came into view, green-black trees tangled against a lightening sky, I got down with relish and left my two charming comrades without a word.

Python's Keep was not dark. A light burned behind the stained-glass port in the sculptured module at the base of the palm. A light for the returning voyager? My heart quickened; I did not think so. The stillness on the lawn was not the stillness of the tender hours before sunrise. It was another kind of stillness entirely.

I ran to Python's Keep, the taste of copper, like the grease from old coins, poisonous in my mouth.

Seated on the driftwood chair in the receiving chamber, Yves Prendick stared up at me with scoured eyes when I came in. His thinning grey hair stuck out comically on all sides as if he had just risen from bed. But because his head was tilted back a little, I could see his exposed throat and the angry lip of a long cut just above his Adam's apple. For a moment — so still did Marina's father seem — I thought he was dead. But the cut was a shallow one, and Prendick blinked at me, pulled himself erect, and raised an unsteady hand.

His voice seemed almost to come out of the wound in his throat. "Markcrier, Markcrier." He looked at me imploringly. "Don't go upstairs, she won't know you for a while anyway, so don't go up there, please, Markcrier."

"Prendick!" I grabbed his shoulders. "What do you mean 'won't know me'? Why the hell won't she know me?"

I turned to go up the stairs, but Prendick leaned forward, clutched the bottom of my tunic, and pulled me down to my knees with surprising strength. His eyes shimmered behind a wild provocative film. "No," he said. "Don't do that. Her mother's with her now, Melantha's up there with her, and

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she'll be all right if you control yourself."

"Prendick! Prendick, tell me what's happened!"

And restraining me with both hands, holding me on my knees before him like a supplicant before a priest, Marina's father told me what had happened. I continued to stare at the wound in his throat, the crimson lip that wrinkled as he talked. I thought: *The story you're telling me is an unpleasant story, I don't like it, it must be coming out of the angry half-developed mouth under your chin, a small malicious mouth, a story that has nothing to do with the sea and ships, a murderous narrative from an evil mouth, like the ravening undercut mouth of a shark, even though the sea has nothing to do, I don't think, with the malicious words that wrinkle under your chin.* On my knees before Prendick, I listened.

"Early yesterday afternoon Fearing Serenos raped your wife, Markcrier," my wife's father said.

"He came to The Orchard with three soldiers of the Gendarmerie, found me in the main house, and invited me to accompany him to Python's Keep. He was extremely cordial, he talked of the work I've been doing for him, he said Marina deserved some word of explanation in regard to his disruption of your anniversary. He wanted to apologize, to explain. He thought highly of Marina. He said, 'You know how much I think of your daughter, Yves. You've always known, I think. You both deserve some evidence of my esteem for you,' or something very much like that. We went together to Python's Keep; the cloaked gendarmes followed, laughing with each other as soldiers do, as if they shared a joke. I thought that Serenos would order them to wait for us on the lawn. He did not; he asked them to enter Python's Keep with their dirty boots and their smelly rifles.

"Marina came down the stairs from the third-level module. The Navarch continued to chat amiably with me, the soldiers to whisper. I suspected nothing — even though the presence of the gendarmes bothered me.

"When Maria reached him and extended her arm in greeting, Serenos pulled her to him, kissed her violently, and then slapped her, once with each hand. 'This is for your father,' he said. 'And this is for your husband.' The soldiers laughed.

"I lurched forward, but one of the gendarmes slammed the butt of his rifle on my instep. Another pushed me into the wall and leaned against me with his forearm, choking off my breath. Marina screamed, but Serenos covered her mouth with his hand and raked her cheek with his nails. I could see

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blood, Markcrier, in the openings between his fingers, and the sight of it made me lurch forward again. Again, the rifle butt. Again, the gendarme shoving me to the wall. This time he put the blade of a long crescent-shaped knife under my chin and held it so that I could not move my head.

"'Make a sound,' he said, 'and I will slice your jugular.'

"The third soldier ripped Marina's gown away from her, tore it straight down her body, uncovered her for their greedy eyes. Then the Navarch grabbed the hem and tore it up to her waist. He put his knee between her legs. When she screamed, her mouth uncovered again, he struck her with the flat of his hand. I strained forward, but the gendarme who held me lifted the blade of his knife against my throat; I felt its edge slice into me.

"I was helpless, Markcrier. I could have died, I suppose, but I didn't have the courage to die. They made me watch as Serenos beat my daughter insensible; they made me watch him rape her, viciously rape her as the soldiers laughed. He lifted her like a puppet, again and again with his hands and body, biting her on the lips until they bled. I shut my eyes, Markcrier, I couldn't stand it. But by the laughter and the noise I know that Serenos raped her twice, once for her father, once for her husband.

"I wished that I could force my head forward, slice open my throat on the gendarme's knife. But I couldn't, I just couldn't, my body wouldn't move, and after a while it was over."

The story was over, the shark's undercut mouth ceased its wrinklings, the evil mouth resolved into a wound, and I found my strength coming back into me — just as if a soul-tormented priest had granted me absolution for the sin of doubting him. I stood up. Prendick's hands fell away from me.

"What about the gendarmes?" I said.

"No. He wouldn't let them touch her. They wanted to, but he wouldn't let them. They were afraid of him."

"Everyone's afraid of him."

Prendick sobbed.

"I'm going upstairs to my wife," I said.

As the stained-glass windows began to color with the translucent coming of dawn, I climbed the winding stairs to the room where Marina lay.

iii.

Thou talkest of harvest when the corn is green:
The end is crown of every work well done;

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The sickle comes not, till the corn be ripe.

— Thomas Kyd

...Strange as it may seem to the unscientific reader, there can be no denying that, whatever amount of credibility attaches to this story, the manufacture of monsters...is within the possibility of vivisection. —H.G. Wells

I contemplated revenge, even if it meant the abrogation of many things that I believed in and perhaps even my own death. I discussed revenge with Prendick, but his work in the theater of surgery kept him occupied seemingly day and night now, and he was too weary upon returning to The Orchard each evening to listen to the ignorant schemes I had concocted during his absences. His mysterious work — the work he would not talk about — drained him; it continued with more urgency than before Marina's rape. When he was home, however, I badgered him.

Once he told me pointedly that I should shut up. "If we fail," he said, "I'm afraid of what will happen to our family, to Marina and Melantha. You haven't thought about that, have you?" Still, the idea nagged. Only when Marina began to recover and became aware of what I was contemplating did the idea finally die. Marina helped it to its death.

"Markcrier," she said, "think about the way you've conducted your life. You're a genuinely good man — one of the few who live in Windfall Last."

"That's a rankly sentimental judgment."

"But a fair one. Now you wish to comport yourself in a way wholly out of keeping with the way you've lived."

"I want what's right."

"It isn't right to take a life when one hasn't been lost. I'm alive, Markcrier, I'm with you at this very moment."

And so I did nothing. Having been given a lesson in the morality of post-Holocaust B (a morality that Serenos did not subscribe to), I kissed Marina, tended to her during the long days of her recuperation, achieved a strange inner peacefulness, and wrote two sections of a long poem which I called *Archipelagoes*. My doing nothing about Serenos, Marina convinced me, was in reality an active reaffirmation of the ethos that made us who we were. Three weeks lapsed.

We discovered that Marina was pregnant.

My own sterility mocked me, the fierce chagrin of the seedless. But too much philosophy ruled me, and I fought down both my chagrin and my incipient rage — with self-administered doses of temper-

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ance. I could see that Marina wanted the child. I did not tell her that I would never be able to love it. How could I tell her? We had resolved to live as intelligent human beings, we had determined not to seek revenge, we had committed ourselves to affirmation and love. My inner peacefulness dissolved, but I would dissimulate if Marina's happiness depended on thinking me happy. Unfortunately, it did. It always had. However, a diplomat learns how to role-play early in his career, and for the first time in our married lives I role-played for Marina. But God! how my own sterility mocked me, how my cancerous chagrin gnawed!

I acted my role well. The only clue I gave Marina to my real feelings was the fact that I did not resume work on *Archipelagoes*. This failure of discipline I attributed to excitement; there were too many other things to do. The mother in her aroused, the wife in her less perceptive, Marina believed me.

And for the final six months of her pregnancy I kept up the deception. I very nearly convinced myself that nothing was wrong, that we were indeed happy. But at night in bed I lay awake, knowing the truth. Before it became uncomfortable for her, I often turned to Marina in the early morning and kissed her half-awake and entered her with inarticulate desperation. She responded as best she could. She imagined that I had grown amorous with the psychological aphrodisiac of a new image of her — the image of her as a fertile, child-carrying woman. My amorousness derived instead from my intense need to believe that the child she carried had sprung from my own flesh: there was no love inside me on these mornings, only the sickness of my need and the mechanical impulse to fuck away the nightmares that pursued me through every waking moment. But in our shared waking hours I kept up the deception. I am certain that she never knew. And she had either forgotten or forced herself not to think of the possibility of the child's being deformed.

Her time came upon her early. An hour before midnight.

We had expected her father to deliver the baby, but Prendick was busy in Windfall Last, occupied as always in the performance of his duty. Fearing Serenos ruled him, but Serenos ruled us all. Even when locked behind his own bedchamber doors, the Navarch manipulated the strings of our lives. Sometimes he could not have known in what pernicious ways.

Marina's contractions were frequent and long in duration; they caused intense pain in her lower back. We had made no provisions

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for the child's coming so early, and I did not know what to do. My wife's pain frightened me. After making Marina as comfortable as I could on our disheveled bed, I told her that I was going to the main house to fetch her mother. She understood, she told me that she would be all right, she winced involuntarily, piteously, at the onset of a new contraction. I left her and went to the main house.

When Melantha and I returned, Marina was screaming. She lay with her good arm and hand behind her head, clutching a rail in the headboard. Her seawing was twisted at a level with her shoulder, flattened awkwardly against the grey sheet. The linen under her hips was wet, her knees up and apart. Melantha straightened Marina's deformed arm, smoothed back the hair plastered against her brow, and helped her remove the underclothes that her amniotic fluid had soaked in breaking.

"I think this is going too fast," Marina's mother said. She was a tall woman with thin lips and eyes the color of bleached shells. "Much too fast."

"What can I do?"

"Get some fresh linen, Markcrier."

"Shouldn't I try to reach Yves? Can't we get him here somehow?"

"I don't see how. Just bring fresh linen, Mark. If you try to reach Yves, you'll only leave me alone for the delivery, everything's happening so quickly." Her thin mouth was Marina's mouth. She said, "You should be beside her — not on your way to Windfall Last."

Marina cried out, turned her head, stared with filmed-over eyes at the ceiling. Something was wrong. Something other than simple prematurity. I went out of the room and crossed an enclosed section of scaffolding to the utility module. Through the window of clear glass I could see the moon-projected shadow of Python's Keep on the lawn, an entanglement as tortuous as death itself. I found clean fragrant linen and returned to the bedroom.

Melantha had eased Marina forward along the bed so that she could squat between her daughter's legs and receive the infant as it was born. Marina lay on the fluid-drenched bedding that I had been sent to replace. Like a serving man at one of the Navarch's dinner parties, I stood with the sheets draped over my forearm.

"Put those down. There isn't time. Hold your wife's arms."

I obeyed. I smelled blood and salt. Leaning over Marina, I could tell that she did not see me; she squinted into a limbo somewhere beyond my head, her face was purpled with the agony of labor. "It's going to be all right," I said,

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knowing that it wouldn't. Something was wrong. Something other than early parturition.

Marina's mother spoke to her over the glistening mound of her belly, told her to concentrate, to push as if she were having a bowel movement. And I held Marina's shoulders and kissed away the salt on her furrowed forehead, saying, "It's going to be all right, it's going to be all right."

The first thing that came out of her womb came within five minutes of my return to the bedroom, so quickly did her labor progress. It was a sluggish, slowly flailing thing with a down of amber hair all over its body and tiny flippers where its hands should have been. I looked at Melantha. Her thin mouth was set. She refused to acknowledge me. She placed the whelp, umbilical cord still trailing, on the bed beside Marina and told me to wrap it in the clean linen. The thing was alive. And very small. It did not cry. Perhaps twenty minutes had passed since my summoning of Mrs. Prendick from the main house — but Marina's contractions continued. She did not open her eyes; she still had not seen the product of her agony.

"There's another child, darling," Melantha said. "I want you to do what you did before, push when the contractions come."

"No," Marina said. "Oh, please, not another one, no, no."

"What the hell is this? What's going on? What is it?" The smell of blood and salt turned the room into a nightmarish slaughterhouse. I was powerless to control or influence events. Mrs. Prendick ignored me.

"Oh, lord," Melantha said after a while, talking in a whisper to herself. "This one has presented me its buttocks."

"What does that mean?" I demanded

"A breech delivery," she said, finally showing a fissure in her apparent invincibility. Her voice broke. She held up her bloodied hands. "I don't know, I just don't know."

And she didn't know, for Marina's labor went into its second hour, then its third, with no progress. Melantha had no instruments; she would not have known how to use them if she had.

When the second thing at last permitted itself to be born, we had both exhausted our repertoire of hysterics. Marina was dead, the tiny creature out of her womb was dead, and Mrs. Prendick, her tall body twisted around upon itself, sat slumped on the floor where she had tried to play midwife. She was not asleep, she was not awake. I covered Marina. Then I picked up Melantha, carried her to another module and placed her on a long

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brocaded divan. The night smelled of distant azaleas.

With that odor in my nostrils, I climbed back through the dark labyrinth of Python's Keep. As if hypnotized, I found my wife's deathbed. It had about it the ancient stillness of an archeological dig. The corpses were remarkably well preserved, one small mummified form feigning life with shallow breaths. I picked it up and covered its mouth and nostrils with the heel and palm of my hand. It scarcely strugged. Then I lifted the other small corpse from its resting place and withdrew from the ancient tranquillity in which Marina slept. She was too far removed from me to elicit my grief.

Not grieving, merely sleepwalking, I carried the animal things from her womb downstairs to the lawn. I walked through the entangled shadow of Python's Keep.

In Marina's garden I dug shallow depressions with my bare hands and buried the things she had grown. For a long while I continued to dig; I tore at the soil with my bruised nails. At last I stopped and sat on my haunches in the dirt — almost comprehending how little free will a free man has.

For I was indeed free.

I resolved, as the tree-entangled dawn came back, to make Fearing Serenos regret the day of his own birthing. I resolved this with all the ruthlessness of incorruptible natural phenomena, the ruthlessness of sunlight and tide. Serenos would burn in a candle of gas; he would drown in the waters of a malignant moon. I resolved these things freely and knew that the Navarch would not escape my vengeance.

On the day of Marina's cremation, Prendick and I went down to the quay to scatter her ashes on the water. We had just come from the official crematory of the Navarchy, several rows of terra-cotta houses away from Prendick's waterfront hospital. We were alone. Marina's mother had remained in the main house at The Orchard, fatigued, uncommunicative, ill.

I carried an amphora — a narrow-mouthed jar — tenderly before me. This contained the final, soot-flavored residue of a human being, and I had to make a concerted mental and physical effort not to raise the jar to my lips and drink of my wife's ashes. Unlike the ashes, the jar was cool.

Together Yves and I descended the stone stairs to the flagstones on the quay. No ship was docked in the place we had chosen, and no sinister trunkless heads adorned the spikes along the harbor wall. The sky was the color of milk.

I began the ritual. I poured the

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ashes into my hand, waited for the wind to blow away from me, and scattered the ashes over the water on this gentle wind. Silently, Prendick followed my example. As we scattered Marina's ashes on the bay, I realized that her ashes, metaphorically, were those of Holocaust C, the fallout of a miniature Armageddon. On the rainbowed water she floated like sentient dust.

God no longer prophesied doom, he was through with us, nor did the Parfects truly concern themselves with our petty murders. Dust on the water Marina was, ash on the sea.

"Yves?"

He looked at me — not with a great deal of responsiveness, his hand feebly emptying its contents on the wind. In seven months he had grown slow and morosely sullen. How often he had been forced to change.

"Yves, we're going to do something about Marina's death."

"What?" He stared. "What will we do?"

"Kill Serenos. Or cripple him. Make him experience, in a similar species of coin, some part of the pain he's caused others."

"With what chance of success?" the doctor said. "And how?"

"You have a head, you have a heart, you once had a daughter. Whatever you decide or fail to decide, I'm going to do something, something to unburden my soul." I paused. "As the Navarch's personal physician, you have access to him."

Prendick stared. "What do you mean? What're you implying?"

"That you should use your head to determine how your access to Serenos will most benefit us. A very simple thing, Yves, very simple."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he turned back to the water and cast a last meager handful of ash into the sea. Our conversation was over, but Prendick had begun to think. I saw inside his head, I saw his emotions running into little wells of intellection, I saw his mind turned into a bleached brain coral and from the brain coral into an ambiguous living thing, confined but free. Soon the wind blew across the empty mouth of the amphora, and the low bass notes of emptiness arose.

We left the quay.

Three days later Prendick invited me to visit him at the theater of surgery for an entire afternoon. Never before had he extended to me or anyone else in his immediate family such an invitation. I knew that the significance of this invitation lay in its following so obviously on our brief exchange on the quay.

Ordinarily, Prendick spent two

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hours every morning in the Palace of the Navarchy, whether Serenos demanded his attention or not. Then he went by carriage down the cobbled streets, past dwellings of rose-red terra cotta, to the waterfront and the only major building that the Parfects had erected among the salt-drenched quays. The theater of surgery was located in this structure, which everyone called Hospitaler House.

A monument of aluminum and glass, its windows polarized against the sun, Hospitaler House rose fifteen stories over the bay of Pretty Coal Sack on an immense round platform that seemed to float on the waters of the bay. Deep in the great cylindrical column upon which the Parfects had long ago erected this symbol of mercy, one might find the submerged, echoing, antiseptic chambers of the theater of surgery — if one were lucky enough to receive an invitation. Once inside the central chamber, the visitor encountered a window of gargantuan proportions facing toward the open sea. A window on a submerged world. When the waters of the Carib lay unruffled under the refracted sky, one could almost swear that the rippling dome of the Sunken Library, further out in the bay, was visible.

A man in a frock escorted me into the central chamber of the column and departed.

I stood alone in the copper-bright vastness, the smells of alcohol and of something oddly zoolike preeminent among the odors that clamored there. Looking up, I saw that a kind of tier went around half the cylinder and that Prendick was standing on this level, his hands on the railing, looking down at me. He said nothing.

I navigated a path through the surgical equipment on the main floor until I was almost directly below him. His face sang with the madness of one who communes with the sea and with sea anemones, one who eats the hallucinogens of shipwreck and death. In fact, he looked like a poet — the way Markcrier Rains ought to have looked so soon after "personal tragedy." But he said nothing. Finally, to provoke some sort of response, I spat on my hands and did a mocking toe-tap dance on the sleek floor.

"Stop that," Prendick said, "and come up here. The stairs are over there."

I found the stairs and climbed up to him. Doors with metal sliding panels for windows made a circuit around the inside of the tier — ten or twelve such doors in all. They were all closed and tightly sealed, but on this level the zoolike smell overrode that of the alcohol; I knew that behind the closed doors was the distinctly animal source of this

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smell. But the thought did not disturb me. Outwardly, I was loose and cheerful. Prendick, after all, was coming round and we would soon have a plan.

"What is this?" I said. "A cellblock for the dogs that the prol-fauves haven't eaten yet?"

"Let's not waste any time, Markcrier. I'll show you what it is."

He selected one of the doors and slid back its window panel as if he were a medieval gaoler in the dungeon of his lord, which, to some extent, he in fact was. The copper panel slid smoothly aside. Unctuous as dead fish, the stench assailed me anew. Immediately upon the panel's opening, it coated the membranes of my mouth and nose like a rancid oil. I stepped back from the window.

"My God, Yves!"

"Look, damn you, turn about and look!"

My mood declined from cheerfulness into apprehension. I examined Prendick's face, then forced myself to stare into the gleaming cell. The cell was clean, the walls gleaming, the floor an immaculate grey — so that the stench had to originate with the hoary creature that sat in the cell's far right-hand corner. An absurdly squat animal.

Propped in the angle of two walls, it appeared to be asleep, its paws draped decorously over its middle. A mantle of white fur, somewhat mangy and sparse, gave the beast the look of a wordly gentleman fallen on difficult times. Although fairly long through the torso, the animal had short deformed hind legs that canted outwards from its body so that its sex lay exposed in a thin lawn of pubic white. Turgid and intricately veined, the organ had no apparent relevance to the body structure of the creature possessing it. But in spite of the piscine stench that had nearly overwhelmed me a moment before, I judged the animal to be anything but a predator.

I turned away from the window again. "It looks a little like a sea otter." *The memorable scent of hard flesh, intimate and pelagic, on Christmas day.* "Except for the size of its limbs and head. And the primatelike genitals. You've been carving on him pretty viciously, Yves, from what I can see."

"You don't see very much. Look again."

"Please," I said with some exasperation. "What for?"

"Look again, Markcrier. This time I'll wake him up so that you can make a more accurate judgment — although I'm glad that you think it looks like a sea otter, that being what I was striving for." He slid the copper panel back and forth across the window, causing it to clank against its frame. "Now look again!" he commanded me.

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Exasperated, uncertain, afraid of what I was being shown, I looked. The animal had not moved, but now its eyes were open and luminous with fear. It remembered Prendick's knife, no doubt, the eventide eternities when the anesthetic had not taken hold.

Then the anomaly of its posture there in the corner struck me — the languidly hanging paws and the tight uncertain eyes. What was it in the creature's lineaments that so unsettled and mocked us? Since its head remained down, only its eyes — looking up under a shaggy misshapen brow — could be responsible for the shame I felt in spying on it: its eyes were the eyes of a human being, trapped but intelligent. The creature seemed unable to lift its head from its breast, but its frightened eyes flickered over our prying faces and showed us, beneath each upward-straining eyeball, a thin crescent of of eloquent white. The whites spoke of unspoken horrors.

I turned again to Prendick. Horrified, I shrugged noncommitally.

"That otter used to be a man, Mark. And the man he used to be was your friend from Marigold Island, I've forgotten his name. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Huerta?" I said incredulously.

"That's right. Huerta. I'd forgotten the name, it's been so long that Serenos has had me doing this one."

"Doing this one," I echoed. I stared at Prendick. The madness singing in his tortured face had softened into an expression of professional distance; he had no concept of the awesome disparity between his words "doing this one" and the gut-rending fact of converting a human being into an animal. His face registered an hysterical calm, his puffy eyes a smug aloofness from reality. Prendick, I realized, was grown into the archetypal mad scientist — with the telling qualification that his madness had seeped into him from the ubiquitous distillation of the Navarch's evil. I was touched by that madness myself. How could I upbraid a madman for the enormities his madness had perpetrated? How could I condemn Marina's father for succumbing to the evil that had begun to drive me? I turned back to the cell window, I ignored the stench, I shouted at the incomplete thing slouched against the wall, "Huerta! Huerta, it's Markcrier, I'm going to let you out, I'm going to try to help you!"

Huerta did not move, but the eyes — the eyes fixed on me reproachfully.

"I've decerebrated it," Prendick said. "It doesn't understand."

"Why? Why have you done this to him?"

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"Because Serenos wanted me to. He said I could restore creatures like this one — and specimens of the prol-fauves — to a condition more suited to their natures or I could condemn my family to death by refusing to do so. Do you understand me, Markcrier? I'm not supposed to be telling you this."

"I understand," I said, going to the railing and looking across the operating hall at the huge window there. The sea pressed against the glass like a woman embracing her lover: crystalline ambiguity.

"At the turn of this century Serenos ordered me to perform exerimental work on cadavers, simple work that never required me to be away from home. But about two years ago, perhaps more, he demanded that I 'create' things for him out of living human beings — things that would be demonstrably less than human. I was to use animals for models, both living animals and extinct ones." Prendick pointed at a door several meters down the tier. "There's a kind of protoman in there. A dawn creature, aeons before either of the Holocausts: the books sometimes call it Zinjanthropus. I did it very well, I think — at least in regard to its outward anatomy."

Prendick joined me at the railing. "Of course, after the cadavers the work was more difficult. The Navarch set deadlines. I had to be away from The Orchard for longer periods. After Marina's rape, he provided me with the old man who was your friend, the old man who became the raw material for the sea otter you've just looked at. Serenos said he wanted a sea otter this time. A white one, he specified a white one. But the old man was so old that he almost died while I was working on him...."

I folded my hands on the railing and put my head down.

Consolingly, Prendick put his arm around my shoulders; he whispered in my ear so that I could feel his breath. "Don't be upset, Mark. It wasn't a personal thing, what I did to your friend." He tapped my shoulder. "Besides, I have a plan."

I looked into the mutely singing eyes of my dead wife's father.

"You see," he said, "I can do the same thing to Fearing Serenos; I can do the *same thing* to the Navarch."

Long ago, in a very old book, I had read about a man who had attempted to turn animals into men through vivisection. What Marina's father was doing embodied the opposite notion; and although innately more repugnant than 'humanizing' dumb beasts, it was a simpler task than the other. After all, the insidiously rational Dr. Moreau had failed because he could not instill a lasting human

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intelligence in his brutish subjects: the nebulous quality of humankind's 'soul' invariably faded with time. But insofar as Prendick had succeeded in carrying out the Navarch's will, he had succeeded precisely because it is easier to destroy than to build, to demolish than to create.

Huerta (if one could forget his eyes) was an animal in every respect. The human being in him had departed with each successive incision of Prendick's scalpel, with each expert deletion of brain tissue, with each cruel alteration of his hands and feet. My rage grew. My heart pounded with the syncopation of *ven-geance, ven-geance.* I knew that I did in fact wish to do the same thing to Serenos, to reduce him completely to the animal he already was.

Understanding that Prendick approached the world from the perspective of a madman enabled me to work with him. We were madmen together. I drew energy from his insanity as surely as if I were a psychic vampire. Prendick's plan had no more brilliance than the recommendation of a bactericide for a sore throat, but we sought to effect his remedy with all the insane zeal we could muster and our very zealousness made the plan work.

It was two months after Marina's death in childbirth that we put this awkward strategy to the test, two months to the day. The first torrential rainfall of October scoured the streets outside the Palace of the Navarchy, scoured the stained terra-cotta dwellings, caused the rabid sea to foam against the quaystones under the force of the October deluge. We had waited, Prendick and I, for just such a morning.

We left The Orchard in Prendick's battery-powered autocart and arrived together at the Palace perhaps an hour before the breaking of a thin winterish light. We had informed not a single other person of our intentions; and because Serenos would have suspected some sort of underhandedness if he had seen me, I remained in the hot, breath-fogged cockpit of Prendick's autocart while he ran up the seemingly varnished steps of the main administrative building. I looked around, prepared to hide if a gendarme in a poncho should approach. Since not a single member of the Gendarmerie came forward to check Prendick's vehicle and since it would be better for us if his autocart were not so brazenly conspicuous at the beginning of our ruse, I dared to expose myself for a moment and drove the autocart out of the way. I drove it into a high-walled shelter between the Palace itself and the eastern wall of

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the "imperial" stables. Because of the rain, no one challenged me.

Bitter cleansing rains of incredible ferocity conspired with us against the Navarch. It was fitting. Had not one of my ancestors washed his sullied body in such torrents and taken their name for his own?

All I had to do was wait. Prendick knew where I would be. I crawled into the autocart's back seat — in reality, a storage well — and covered myself with a heavy tarpaulin. Immediately drenched in my own sweat, I listened to the roar of the world.

In time, Prendick would emerge into the rain with Serenos and the Navarch's inevitable uniformed riflemen — Molinier, his favorite, among them. The pretext for getting the Navarch to take a jaunt in the rain would be Prendick's avowal of a genuine miracle of vivisection at Hospitaler House. For several weeks Serenos had been pressuring my mad friend about his progress with Huerta, but Yves had put him off with clumsy excuses — so that we might take advantage of the beginning of the rainy season.

Now it had come. At no other time would the Navarch have even considered riding from the Palace to any other part of Windfall Last in a vehicle other than his ornate open carriage, a conveyance drawn by four identical Percherons. But like many men who place no value on the lives of human beings, he did not choose to let valuable animals suffer; therefore, we had assumed that Serenos would not require his beautifully groomed horses to brave this inclement October morning. And we assumed correctly.

I heard footfalls on the flagstones. The door of the autocart opened, turning up the volume on the rain and allowing a gust of muggy wind to lift a corner of my tarpaulin. Then the slamming of the door and a return of the storage well's stifling humidity. Crouched under the tarp, I waited for some word from Prendick.

Finally he said, "He's going to ride with us, Markcrier — or with me, that is, so far as he knows. I'm driving over to the entrance to pick him up."

I said nothing. Moving through the rain, the autocart whined softly.

"Did you hear me?" Prendick said. "And it may be that his personal gendarmes will follow in another vehicle. Perhaps even on horseback, since their horses aren't his own coddled Percherons. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," I said. "I was just wondering what Serenos smells like when he's wet. Have you ever wondered about that?"

"No. Why would I wonder about something like that?"

"Your unique perspective on

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the human condition," I said, at once regretting the condescension of my tone. But Marina's father had not heard me. The tires of the autocart sloughed through the runoff from the Palace's rain gutters, and the gentle whine of the batteries ceased altogether.

We were at rest.

There were voices and footfalls. The door opposite Prendick roared open, then kicked shut with a violent *thwump!* We rocked a little. Even from beneath my concealing canvas I could feel another body adjusting to the narrow confines of our autocart, a body of no small proportions.

Then again the amplified crackling of the rain and Prendick shouting out his window at someone: "Hell, no, I won't carry you in here! You're already sopping wet, your capes and jodhpurs all sopping! And this thing wasn't made to transport armies, it wasn't made to —"

A voice shouted back an indistinct response, "....."

Then I heard the Navarch's voice (it was the first time I had heard it since he had told me, *I'll never ask anything of you again, Markcrier*). Now he was leaning over Prendick and shouting at the undoubtedly miserable gendarme in the rain, in a voice that sounded both annoyed and authoritative, "Just follow us, Molinier, you and the others! Get in another goddamn vehicle and follow us closely. Dr. Prendick can be counted on to see me safely to Hospitaler House!"

"....." Molinier or someone responded. The window went up again, but I thought for a moment about Molinier. He was a handsome man in his late forties, with vestigial gill slits — unfunctioning, of course — just behind his jawbones on the upper part of his neck. I had known him relatively well in the final period of my service to Windfall Last. For a murderer, he was an amiable enough fellow. We had once worked together with a complete absence of either recrimination or jealousy.

Then the tires began whirring through water once more and the engine whining like a swarm of summer mosquitoes. The rain pounded the fiber-glass hull of the autocart with barbaric tattoos, the patterns of which altered in intensity and rhythm every few minutes. I waited. I suffered the oppressive humidity of my closed-in hiding place.

But when Prendick said, "Your gatemen weren't very conscientious today, Navarch," I uncovered and stuck a pistol in the intimate depression at the base of Fearing Serenos' skull. The pistol had belonged to Marina.

"If you move," I said, "I won't

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hesitate to let this nasty little machine take a core sample of your grey matter."

There was a momentary silence. Then, "Quite poetically phrased, Markcrier, quite poetic indeed."

"Shut up," I said. I pushed the mouth of the barrel deeper into the intimate depression at the back of his head. I was enjoying myself: the tough language, the gun butt cradled in my palm, this conspiracy of dark rains and lofty madness. Moreover, Serenos shut up.

Because Prendick allowed the autocart to careen down the cobbled streets, rocking back and forth over its wheels, it took us very little time to reach Hospitaler House. Several unmasted boats pitched in their moorings beside the quays. A few fishermen huddled together on various decks, pointing and gesturing with heads and hands as if they were demigods attempting to calm the sea. But except for some children we had passed beneath the Palace of the Navarchy, no other people had ventured outdoors.

We halted on the perimeter of the great platform on which the hospital seemed to float.

As soon as Prendick got out and went around to the Navarch's door, Serenos slammed it open, knocked Prendick down, and hurtled his lithe muscular body into the downpour. I pursued. Bruising my upper thighs in the process, I lurched out of the autocart's back seat.

With rain slashing out of the sky into my face, I took aim on the Navarch and shot him in the calf in his right leg. I shot him again in the buttocks. His royal vestments fluttering about him like the wings of a manta ray, he toppled heavily and rolled onto his belly on the running concrete. The rain, like so many fluid needles, pinioned him there.

In a moment Prendick was up from his back, and the two of us lifted our wounded despot, held him erect between us, and stumbled with him toward the nearest entrance to the building.

We went in.

Prendick found his keys and admitted us to the elevator that would drop us into submerged operating hall of the theater of surgery. Down we went. But in the closed quarters of the elevator, supporting Serenos as he bled, I realized that the man smelled exactly like a wet dog. The reek of mildewed fur came off him as a nearly visible steam.

I grew angry. Why were we taking Serenos to the cloistered vivisection area to which only Prendick had access? We could end things quickly if we wished: I could shoot the bastard in the head at point-blank range, shoot him and

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conclude eight years of needless suffering with that same penetrating bullet head. But we were down. We were on the floor of the operating hall.

Molinier and the other gendarmes were not long in arriving. In our submerged haven we watched them enter Hospitaler House via a closed-circuit television unit. Prendick went upstairs and told them the remarkable — absurdly remarkable — story that he had devised over two weeks ago especially for this critical confrontation. He told them (and I shivered in the submerged hall, imagining the words he chose) that the Navarch had had a sudden and acute attack of stigmata in his hands and side, an unpredictable infirmity to which men in high positions had been mysteriously subject throughout all recorded history. We hoped that the utter irrationality of our story would appeal to the superstitions of men as narrow as most of the gendarmes. Because of this attack of stigmata, Prendick went on, he had placed the Navarch in a private room in one of the lower levels of Hospitaler House, where Serenos was now resting comfortably.

Meticulously observant, Molinier had seen evidence of blood on the streaming pavement outside Hospitaler House and in the upper hallway as well. He did not choose to take Marina's father at his word. Therefore, Prendick came back down to me and prepared to give Molinier the assurance that he wanted. Only when I forced the Navarch, at gun point, to announce over the hospital's intercom system the nature of his injuries, the extent of his loss of blood, and the fact that he would be staying with us for three or four more days, only then did the gendarmes accept the lies we had fed them. Molinier and the others left.

We drugged the Navarch. He lay unconscious on his stomach on one of the metallic operating tables, and we sat on stools and talked like two medical students above his inert form. We had stripped him, and the finely haired body of the man fascinated us. Ageless and heretofore invincible, Fearing Serenos had the animal vibrancy of a jaguar — a jaguar with a muted sorrel pelt, a jaguar whose body was stiffened with bad dreams. The bullet holes in Serenos' calf and buttock actually hurt my heart; they were crimson insults to an otherwise perfect physique. But seeing him naked, I hated Fearing Serenos even more than I had hated him after Marina's rape, or after her pregnancy, or after her preternatural labor. Beast creatures slept in the seed of the Navarch's loins.

"Well, what shall we do with him?" Prendick asked. "What sort

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of thing shall we turn him into? After I've removed the bullets?"

Turning toward the hall's immense window, I looked at the surprisingly calm waters beyond. Faint undulations swept against the glass, a stirring of unknown powers and unwritten poems.

"Well, Mark, what do you want to do?" Prendick came back into my line of vision; his mad eyes were upon me, opaque with dull expectancy.

"I want you to turn Serenos into a shark," I said. "I want you to give him the shape and the hairlessness and the blunt stupid nose of a shark. That's what I want you to do with him."

The mad eyes stared, they glinted. And without a single flicker of outrage, these same eyes acquiesced in the irrationality of my long-sought revenge.

Yes, Prendick's eyes were saying, I may be able to make a shark of him, or something very like, no matter, the challenge compels me to attempt it, how did you settle so quickly on such a miraculous fashioning, a shark, a shark, even though I've never ventured away from homoiothermal creation before, always having begun with men, but this...this truly compels.

So the eyes spoke to me, altogether consenting.

And so we began.

No one truly knew what had befallen the Navarch, although Molinier demanded that Dr. Prendick provide him with tangible evidence that Serenos still lived. This ultimatum came on the second day of the Navarch's captivity, and Prendick, acting upon no stratagem but the intuition of his madness, simply replied that he could offer no such evidence because in a paroxysm of nocturnal spiritual ecstasy the Navarch had cast his eyes up to heaven and died! For some reason, Prendick filigreed this unlikely "official report" with the observation that the Navarch's ecstasy had followed closely upon his viewing a new marvel of vivisection, the Otter Man.

Although no word of Serenos' "death" reached the general public, Prendick's report went out to every member and past member of the Council of the Navarchy, including myself. Everyone believed. Inherent in this bizarre account of our leader's dying was a drama that no one could ignore. Had the multitudinous sins of Fearing Serenos at last run him to ground and figuratively torn away the flesh at his throat? If so, the punishment was just.

I had to laugh — at my coconspirator's inventive fantasy and at the sanctimonious reaction of the council members.

Because no one had seen me on

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the morning of the Navarch's journey to Hospitaler House, I was above suspicion. Therefore, on the fourth day of Serenos' confinement (the third day after the announcement of his death), I joined my former colleagues in the Palace of the Navarchy. They treated me with deference and respect. As the only man in Guardian's Loop's history ever to have lived twice in Azteca Nueva among the enigmatic Parfects, I had an enigmatic position all my own. Eight years in retirement had heightened for these men the illusion of my venerableness. And, finally, their quietly held knowledge that my wife had died as a result of Serenos' cruelty secured for me the status of a living martyr.

Desperate for direction, they turned to me. Even Molinier, who had expressed serious doubts about the complete accuracy of Prendick's report, accepted my assurances that no foul play had occurred. After all, I knew the doctor. He had suffered more than most of us at Serenos' hands (quietly knowledgeable looks passed between the council members when I said this), but no man had been so diligent as my father-in-law in the impartial execution of his duty. Swarthy, keen-eyed, gill-scarred Molinier listened to my word and believed me.

Without seeking the office, I had become the interregnal Navarch. I had not anticipated this outcome, had not been prescient enough to understand the impact of my own reputation. How could I have hoped to understand? My reputation and I shared nothing in common but those two amazingly complex words, Markcrier Rains.

Nevertheless, I assumed the pilot's role almost without thinking.

Although Molinier supported me in this capacity and rallied more than three quarters of the Gendarmerie in my behalf, a small segment of our official police force chose to support an aging bureaucrat who had never quite acceded to the prefecture of the organization. Even while Serenos had ruled, this man — Duvalier — had openly criticized the policies and methods of his immediate superior, Molinier (perhaps with some justification, considering our relatively effortless capture of the Navarch); but Duvalier had not been removed from his position, primarily because he understood the delicate business of bodyguarding as no one else and because he had made fast friends with several of the more elderly council members. On the second day of my "reign," it became apparent that the faction supporting this man would not go quietly away of its own volition. Molinier

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approached me; he asked for permission to deal with these reprehensible few. I listened. Not yet aware of the power that resided in my simplest word, I told Molinier to do what had to be done.

The following day I discovered that twenty freshly severed heads decorated the spikes along the harbor wall. The faces were masks of hard black blood, and the sea gulls dived upon them with the impunity of falling sunlight.

Once again I had indirectly precipitated an atrocity. How many times would I be responsible for other people's deaths?

Although this question genuinely pained me, tortured me in the long midnights, I sublimated its painfulness and tried to glory in the new-found security of my position. I had become the Navarch. I hoped that I had not become Fearing Serenos. The title was enough; I did not want the man's name.

A rumor started that the sea gulls near the harbor had gone mad and that they copulated in the air as they fell in screaming torrents on the impaled heads of the slaughtered gendarmes. I half believed the rumor and expected the heads to have been devoured the next time I ventured to the quays. The appetites of animals, sexual and otherwise, haunted my thoughts.

Sea gulls copulating in the air?

iv.

May no one die till he has loved!
—St.-John Perse

Nevertheless, the disembodied heads of the rebel gendarmes greeted me when I finally found the time to visit Prendick at Hospitaler House. The libidinous gulls had not completely ravished them or themselves.

Trembling, I sought out Marina's father and came upon him in the sunken chamber of surgery. In the last several days he had taken the first strides toward effecting the metamorphosis of our drugged former leader. I wanted to halt this madness, but I could not. I convinced myself that the process had alreay gone beyond the point of legitimate reversal. If we stopped now, I argued to myself, Serenos would be a thing, a grotesque parody of his former self. Since we could not restore him, it was best to proceed. Moreover, I realized that under no circumstances would Prendick be likely to permit an interruption of his first tender modifications of our patient's anatomy. He pursued the animalization of Fearing Serenos with too much innocent enthusiasm to be put off by my sober moral concern. He had worked too hard already. Therefore, inertia ruled me — inertia and my own persistent desire to see the Navarch suffer. I

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delighted in Prendick's malicious skill.

"Markcrier," he said when I came into the hall. "Have you come to see how our experiment progresses?"

I ignored the question; I had other matters on my mind. "We must give the council a body, Yves. Molinier demands a body. Before we can announce Serenos' death to the populace of Windfall Last, there must be some evidence that he is, in fact, dead. Everyone wants a funeral."

"Give them a sealed casket and a cremation ceremony," Prendick said curtly. "Tell them that will suffice."

"And if Molinier should wish to examine the body?"

"I have *already* examined the body! I am the physician to the Navarch, and no one has the right to question my competence or loyalty." As if I had questioned both, he looked at me accusingly. "All you need do, Markcrier, is tell them that no one views the Navarch's body once it has been prepared for cremation. Tradition dictates this procedure. You're the new Navarch. Who'll not believe you?"

"What tradition, Yves, what tradition dictates this procedure?"

"None. But say it anyway. No one remembers the occasion of the previous Navarch's death; consequently, no one will challenge you about the funeral procedures. The history of Windfall Last," Prendick said in a faraway voice, "is not so well documented as that of several pre-Holocaust civilizations. How very odd that is."

"Yes. Odd." I was not amused.

"Come with me and see how your shark progresses, Markcrier. It's slow, it's very slow — but you'll be proud of me." In his eyes: the images of tangled seaweed and the minute tentacles of an old obsession, one we shared.

I followed him onto the tier above the chamber's main floor, the tier where I had come face to face with Emmanuel Huerta in his new incarnation. This thought I put in a far corner of my mind, but the odor of fish and fur recalled it to me with a punishing vividness at brief unpredictable moments in my conversation with Prendick. The tier still reeked. I refused, however, to let these moments rule me.

We looked down on a large round tank that had not been in the theater of surgery on the day of Serenos' capture. A thin milk-colored solution swirled in the tank — a solution that apparently flowed through an assemblage of swan-necked glass tubing into the adjacent cleansing unit and then back into the barbarously foaming tank, endlessly recirculating, like pale blood. So evil did this

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apparatus look that I had the ridiculous idea that Prendick had created it solely for its appearance. Ancient horror stories paraded their seriocomic plots through my mind. But Prendick was intoxicated with the very hatreds and passions that had driven me; and madness oftentimes mocks itself.

Despite these somewhat calming observations, I could not overlook the fact that Fearing Serenos lay at full length in this milky whirlpool, his head held out of the water by means of a metal brace that forced his chin to point at the ceiling. And his face was naked. I would not have recognized the Navarch had I not already known what to expect — primal nudity, the hairlessness of reptiles, flesh the color of burnt rubber.

Looking down at the open tank, at the milky solution laving Serenos's body, I asked, "Does he know what's going on? Have you...decerebrated him?"

"No. I'm not going to. We decided not to, didn't we?"

"Then he *does* know what's going on?"

"No, he doesn't. Look at him, Markcrier. He's on a heavy dose of slightly modified pentobarbital sodium. The drug serves two purposes. It keeps him anesthetized against the maceration process of the whirlpool, which is more frightening than painful, I should imagine; and it produced in his own metabolism the first evidences of a condition approaching that of poikilothermal animals: cold-bloodedness. Once we remove him from the tank, a partial severing of his spinal cord will insure that he continues in this cold-blooded state, just like all good mantas and sharks."

"And what does the whirlpool do?"

Prendick stared not at the tank, but at the gently heaving waters of Pretty Coal Sack. "It also does two things. The solution in the tank consists in part of a depilatory agent to remove the Navarch's hair by inactivating the follicles themselves. I removed his facial hair by shaving and electrolysis. What's especially interesting, though, is that the solution contains another agent to soften his skeletal system and then reverse the ossification process altogether so that his bones turn back into pliant cartilage, the cartilage of the womb. At this very moment calcium and phosphorus are being leached from his bones, Markcrier. When his skeleton consists entirely of cartilage and when the poikilothermal condition has been firmly established, I can begin to use the knife." Prendick looked at me with a weary innocence. "Two or three months' work will remain even after I've removed him from the whirlpool.

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Perhaps for a Christmas gift I can deliver into your hands this predatory thing which we have both fathered. A shark will be born."

"Perhaps," I said.

And I left Yves Prendick to his work and returned, under guard, to the Palace of the Navarchy. I did not go back to Hospitaler House for nearly two weeks — although Yves came to the Palace almost every morning to see me. I made use of this time away from the sunken surgical hall to strengthen my grip on the levers of power and to woo a population that could remember no Navarch but Fearing Serenos. Most of this courting took place during the public cremation ceremony, over which I presided from beginning to end.

I delivered an impassioned address about the right of men to govern their own lives within the limitations of the law; I read to the clustering crowd, flamboyant in their yellow and scarlet mourning dress, a small section of my uncompleted poem *Archipelagoes.*

And the casket remained closed throughout the ceremonies, even when on brief display in the outer courtyard of the crematorium. When the casket was burned, consumed at incredible temperatures, it yielded royal ashes — though they were not those of Serenos at all, but instead the charred dust of a misbegotten sea otter that had been Emmanuel Huerta.

I had ordered Prendick to kill Huerta in the least painful way he could devise; and on the morning before the requiem rites for Serenos, Yves had injected a minuscule air bubble into the old fisherman's bloodstream. His body we had later concealed in the Navarch's casket for the purpose of the state funeral. No one doubted our story; no one wept for a last look at the late ruler's corpse.

All went well in the weeks immediately following the funeral. The people accepted me, the council supported my every recommendation, Molinier and his gendarmes dogged my footsteps with an assiduousness beyond reproach.

I did not go back to Python's Keep. I did not leave the city. Prendick returned to The Orchard every night to walk among the trees with Melantha, to keep her company, to calm her fears about his long sessions at Hospitaler House. But I would not return to Python's Keep. Too many mementos of another time crowded upon me when I stepped over the threshold, a fragrance as of ancient perfumes and constantly rejuvenating seas. I experienced again the powerful intercourse of two hearts, and the experience always hurt me.

Nevertheless, I saw Prendick

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often. I visited him in the submerged operating hall where he continued to mold Serenos into the ichthyoid form of something resembling a shark. He cut. He performed skin grafts. He removed the former Navarch's genitals and sculptured his bifurcated lower body into the smooth, resilient fuselage of a fish. Working with the macerated bones of Serenos' skull, Prendick shaped a neckless head; he flattened the strong human nose; he moved the brutal eyes out of their forward-looking sockets and placed them on opposite sides of the streamlined sharkish snout.

Where a man had once existed, Marina's father saw to it that a knife-born member of the order *Selachii* came into being. I began to believe that no such man as Fearing Serenos had ever lived in Windfall Last, for the creature on Prendick's operating table bore no resemblance to any human being I had ever encountered. Its moist grey flesh was marbled with intimations of blue, its face grinned with the livid sewn-up grin of a museum horror. Things progressed nicely, things progressed nicely. But even though it was by then the middle of November, a great deal of delicate vivisecting and grafting remained to be done.

And by the middle of November I had begun to make enemies.

Molinier could not understand my refusal to permit bodyguards to descend with me into the sunken chamber of surgery. I argued that the intricacy of my friend's experiments demanded a silent surgical environment.

Why, then, did the Navarch go so frequently to the operating area? Was his interest in vivisection so profound?

I argued that Prendick was engaged in activity that might one day free the population of Windfall Last from its biological heritage. One day the Parfects might choose to readmit us to the world we had twice repudiated, and they would do so because of my friend's work. I went to him so frequently because my presence steadied his hand, my encouragement made him aware of our trust in his skill. These lies I told Molinier on several occasions, but he held his skepticism in check and continued as my friend.

He did not become my enemy until I had made a severe tactical error by attempting to formulate policy on the basis of moral conviction. The poet ruled where the bureaucrat ought to have prevailed.

I decided that the Gendarmerie (even after Molinier's October purge) was at a strength incommensurate with its duties — that too many of its members were callous self-seeking men who used their position as a carte blanch to

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insult, intimidate, bludgeon, and kill. I ordered Molinier to discover the identities of these men and to remove them from the police force.

At that moment, Molinier became my enemy.

Perfunctorily, he did what I asked — but the men whom he removed went down to the quays and destroyed the vessels, the nets, and the cargoes of a council member's private fishing fleet. None of the remaining gendarmes would make an arrest; not a single marauder came to justice.

While Prendick's knife made careful incisions in the flesh of the former Navarch, my idealism gouged jagged rents in my own, the current Navarch's, credibility. But now I had power. I persisted. I refused to toady to the old men and the fiery youths who encircled me with their own peculiar brands of avarice and who gave me immoral advice. Because of what Prendick and I had done, the position of Navarch belonged to me.

Let its use be worthy, I prayed. For I intended to use it.

Then one night as I lay in my canopied bed, the ghost of Emmanuel Huerta came to me in the form of a white otter and sang to me in my dream. On the next day I took action to lift the interdict on the fishermen of Marigold Island, just as Fearing Serenos had once falsely told me he had done. I decreed that all who wished to do so could return to Guardian's Loop; the day of enforced exile was done.

I sent a vessel to Barbos to deliver this happy news, but few of the fishermen there believed. They knew that Huerta had never returned to them.

The vessel I had dispatched eventually came home — gliding over the waters of Pretty Coal Sack, its sails as lewd as soiled linen, its prow dull and stupid-looking above the spitlike froth through which it cut. I waited on the quay. Not one of the members of the colony of exiles disembarked, however, and the shipmaster insisted that my lifting of the interdict had meant nothing to the people at Barbos, so wanting in discernment and gratitude were they all.

Several nights later a crewman from this vessel, whom I had granted a clandestine audience, told me that three fishermen from the colony had come aboard ship, but that they had been murdered and cast into the sea not more than an hour out from Marigold. I believed this sailor, but I could do nothing.

The heavy rains continued to fall, drowning us with their vehemence and their unremitting noise. A biblical deluge for the world's last men, a deluge of tall rains striding over the earth.

As the rains fell, Prendick

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brought Serenos further along. He amputated his arms, smoothed the shoulders into his tough symmetrical body, began shaping dorsal fins from the skin he had cut away from the amputated arms — skin he had also treated in a chemical brine. Now when I visited Prendick, the smell of the surgical chamber drove me onto the tier above the main floor; I watched everything from a distance, literally and metaphorically aloof.

Exercising my power as Navarch, however, I tried to remain aloof from the evil that existed in Windfall Last. I proceeded with my catch-as-catch-can program of reform. Strangers and aliens seemed to surround me; they looked on as I ordered that all the iron spikes jutting skyward from the harbor wall be pried from their sockets and scrapped, never again to receive upon their cold lance-tips the heads of dismembered human beings. Even in this, unthinking men opposed me.

A work force of impressed prol-fauves removed the spikes from the wall, but the gendarmes whom I had sent to supervise this labor made bets among themselves and instigated bloody little combats among the individual work crews — so that prol-fauves used the dislodged spikes to maim and disembowel one another while their supervisors sat horse on the streets above them and cheered them on. Only the sudden onset of great winds and torrential rains prevented this casually provoked slaughter from developing into a small insurrection. Before the coming of the streaming torrents, the gendarmes had had to shoot several of the workmen for turning away from the quays and threatening to mob into the city with their crude weapons. On this same afternoon two horses with ripped bellies, having thrown their riders, bolted through the rain toward the Palace; slime-coated intestines gleamed with crimson intensity on the cobbles. Just as in Prendick's theater of surgery, I watched everything from a distance.

Again I had failed. Eight years of isolation from the ways of men had not prepared me for the frustrations of thwarted authority. How had my Marina come to me from such a milieu of contradictory impulses? What sort of animal inhabited Guardian's Loop? Indeed, what sort of ambiguous animal ravened in my own breast, devouring both the bitter and the sweet?

At the beginning of December an unexpected thing happened.

Seemingly materializing from nowhere, a tall silver-eyed Parfect presented himself at the gate of the Palace of the Navarchy and told the gendarmes on duty that he would

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see the new ruler of our island. As a concession to our sensibilities, he wore a white linen robe with Grecian fretwork at the sleeves and hem. The guards fell back at once and found a council member to usher the Parfect into my chambers on the topmost floor.

When the Parfect entered, I was sitting beneath the open skylight looking at the fish in my aquarium and trying to decide if I should attempt sleep. Dusk had sifted down on me; my head ached. But startled by the twilight apparition of the Parfect, I stood up and discovered with shame that I was weeping. Inexplicably. I did not recognize this alien brother from either of my two stays in Azteca Nueva, but I embraced him as a friend.

We conversed in the fading light. He ignored the salt tears on the tilted planes of my cheeks and moved about the room as he spoke, gracefully gesturing with his hands. His voice dealt with our human words — our pragmatic Franglais — with a precision born of unfamiliarity. My own voice faltered, faltered in attempting to reach his heart; but neither of us, in reality, said a great deal. The message of this visitor from Azteca Nueva consisted not so much of words as of a perfectly communicated *tone.*

Disappointment.

The Parfects felt disappointment. For centuries they had waited for us, delaying an inevitable decision. It was not enough that we merely struggled. His voice smoothed out this last suggestion and played with another tone — although that of disappointment continued to undulate gently beneath the surface. The inevitable decision would be delayed again, this time for the purpose of receiving a final representative of mankind in Azteca Nueva. Serenos had put them off. Very well, then, the beginning of the new decade (still more than a year away) would suffice, and they desired that Markcrier Rains once again be that emissary —

— Markcrier Rains, he who no longer slept beside a woman sharing the sea-smell of her womb; he who held the poison-tipped scepter of a mysteriously fallen prince; he who on past occasions had walked haltingly among the Parfects of the luxuriantly flowered mainland, in the shadow of Popocatepetl.

No other could come in my stead, they had settled upon me. Windfall Last would find a ruler more suited to her disposition during my absence, and upon my return that new ruler would step aside for me. Then the decision would be withheld no longer; it

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would come down to us, out of either disappointment or forgiveness. And the world would be changed.

"Do not think us unfeeling, Markcrier," the Parfect said before leaving me. "It may be that we feel too deeply."

When he had gone, the twilight departing on the trailing hem of his Grecian robe, the room still contained something of is presence. Even in the resultant dark this intangible balm hung in the air, like the fragrance of foreign evergreens. The idea of living again in Azteca Nueva did not seem completely unpleasant.

Only in the morning, when sunlight cascaded in like harp music, did I realize that going once more among the Parfects would signal for me a private doom, a living suicide. I refused to see anyone that morning; I failed to visit Hospitaler House. Nearly thirteen months remained to me before the advent of the new decade, and in that time I might be able to devise an alternative acceptable to the Parfects. But I would not go, I would not. Still, it was almost a week before the lingering suggestion of the messenger's presence disappeared utterly from my council room.

On the ninth day of the month I went to Prendick again and found that his work was nearly done. He had given Serenos (*could this wicked-looking product of the vat and knife truly be Serenos?*) the crescentic underslung mouth of a shark. He had also given him an armoring of artificially cultivated placoid scales and teeth to occupy the predatory mouth.

As I watched from the tier of copper cages, Prendick went about the one task that he had purposely postponed until every other procedure of the metamorphosis lay behind him. Once again the tank came into play, but this time without all the paraphernalia of recirculation and cleansing. Marina's father had submerged himself in the tank, which now murmured with stinging salt water; and he was working on the snout of the creature that hung in traction over the water's surface, perhaps an inch or so of this brine lapping its underbelly. *Ah, Serenos, have we brought you to this?*

I watched for almost three hours. During all this time Prendick and I exchanged not a single word; of late we had had less and less to say to each other, as if the surgeon's scalpel had split our tongues. We communed in other ways, knowing that only two of us — in all the world — knew of this ultimate degradation of Fearing Serenos. Prendick was mad, of course, and I.... It was too late to concern myself.

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The last step was taking place, the creation of the shark's louverlike system of gills: the fluttering, blood-blue branchiae through which Serenos would breath. Prendick had preserved this moment in order not to have to work in the water until he absolutely must. But the moment was upon him; and occasionally lowering his suspended patient into the tank and then raising him out again, he cut and cauterized, severed and tied. Sometimes he worked through the monster's cruel mouth.

At the end of the third hour, Prendick collapsed Serenos' useless lungs, administered a stimulant, and dropped him out of traction into the water — where his new respiratory system began to function. Then Prendick climbed out of the tank and grinned up at me, his face more cadaverous and his trunk and limbs more wanly etiolated than I had ever seen them. He looked ill.

But I grinned, too, and marveled at the drugged pseudo-shark that stirred its body and tail with lethargic gracelessness. We had done what we had set out to accomplish. If our specimen was not a perfect representative of order *Selachii,* it approached that ideal and nevertheless did us honor. I could not help grinning.

Still, we knew it would be impossible to release Serenos into the bay before he had recovered from the gill operation and gained the necessary stamina to compete with the sea creatures who would challenge him for prey. Prendick said, "Give him until Christmas, Markcrier," and those were the first words either of us had spoken since my arrival in the early morning. I had no doubt that even in the body of a lower animal Serenos would compete quite well. As a man, he had possessed a gift for tenacious survival; and although his brain had been cut into separate lobes and flattened into the narrow brain casing of a shark, Prendick believed that Serenos still had at least a portion of his former intelligence. He would not be ready for the open sea, however, for well over two weeks. An eternity.

In Windfall Last I received word of a plot against my life. Informers came to my gates nightly with fantastic stories of treason and rebellion. All pled for my ear, all expected recompense.

A week before Christmas a man came to me with letters bearing the signatures of Molinier and a young lieutenant in the Gendarmerie. The contents of these letters pointed, without hope of any error, at the desire of these two men to kill me. The next day I ordered Molinier to send me the reports of the

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Gendarmerie's activities for the last two months. When they came, I compared the signatures on the reports with the handwriting and signatures of the assassination letters supposedly written by Molinier. No noticeable differences existed. I paid the informer, himself a member of the force, and told him to find at least five other gendarmes who shared his active loyalty to the Navarch. With less difficulty than I had expected, he did so.

These six men I dispatched at a predawn hour to Molinier's quarters in the lower courtyard; they took him from his bed and returned with him to a vacant section of the stables where I awaited their coming, two of the older council members at my side. We showed Molinier the documents, and I confronted him with the damning similarity of the signatures, studying his impassive face for those involuntary tics and crawls that of themselves confess the man. But he said simply, "I would never have put my name to a letter so crassly seditious, Navarch," and glared at me with unrepentant eyes.

My heart was torn. I did not believe him. I said, "You will die as quickly and as painlessly as a man may die, Molinier, because until now you refused to lie to me — even when you disagreed with my executive mandates."

He looked at me coldly. Soul sick, I waved my hand and left.

The informant and his five companions took Molinier to the ivied wall between the stables. There they shot him. The rifle reports echoed over the flagstone like polyps exploding in their shells; a sea dream died with each report.

The repercussions of these shots were felt from the Palace to the quays. Because the force might have deposed me if properly unified, I left the Gendarmerie directorless. As a result, I could not leave my own sleeping chamber and conference rooms for fear that a fanatic worse than Molinier would slay me in the streets. In the Palace, the younger council members treated me with borderline courtesy and whispered among themselves.

But Prendick, who was now free of our self-imposed labor, stayed with me during the afternoons and "monitored my health." While every other bureaucrat in the government engaged in intrigue, he kept me informed of our patient's progress. He seemed entirely unaware of the precariousness of my hold on the Navarchy. He thought only of Serenos, of our magnificent pseudoshark.

"He doesn't eat," Prendick said one afternoon in the administrative suite. "I'm afraid he's losing strength rather than gaining it."

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"Why?" I meant, *Why are you afraid that's happening?*

But Prendick responded, "To deny us our revenge, Markcrier. Some part of his conscious mind is operating to bring all our efforts to naught. He's *willing* himself to death. But to combat his will I drug him and feed him intravenously."

"He'll finally grow stronger, then?"

"I don't know, he's a preternatural creature. Do you know what I heard a simple fisherman once say of him?"

"No. What?"

"That Serenos and the Adam of Genesis are the same person. The fisherman claimed that Adam never really died but wandered throughout the earth cursing his fall and his own meekness before God after the expulsion from Eden. Since no one can remember when Serenos was born, the old fisherman believed this story. He believed that Serenos was Adam."

"A legend," I said. "The legend of the unregenerate Adam. It has great antiquity, Yves, but not a great deal of respectability."

"Well, if it's true," Yves said, "we've finally ended it."

"Yes, I suppose we have. Or else the unregenerate Adam is in the process of ending it himself. Forever. By foiling our plans for him. An extremely unregenerate Adam is Serenos."

"I don't want to lose him, Mark, not after all the work I've done. If he dies, I'd have to create another like him — only more detailed and less flawed than this one. My hands know what to do now."

To that I answered nothing. Marina's father had regained a little of his former color with several successive nights of uninterrupted and heavy sleep, but he still spoke from a nightmarish, topsy-turvy point of view. Had he transferred his love for the memory of his daughter to another of his children? Locked inside the Palace of the dominion which I ostensibly ruled, I did not understand how one could develop an affection for sharks, even man-made ones. Pride in accomplishment, perhaps, but never abiding affection. Spontaneous awe, perhaps, but never love.

When Christmas came, the old residual festivities took place and everyone silently acknowledged the existence of a general truce.

Men and women danced in the streets. The ships in the harbor flew brilliant handmade banners of gold and scarlet. The officers of the Gendarmerie wore their blue dress uniforms and organized a parade of horses and men from the Palace to the quays, a parade in which drums, flutes, and teakwood mandolins (these last played by the only Orientals on Guardian's Loop)

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provided a gay and stately accompaniment to the clatter of horses' hooves. Sea gulls, screeching and wheeling, rode the updrafts above the Christmas festivities like animated diacritical marks on a parchment of pale blue.

At nine o'clock in the morning I went out on the balcony and told the gendarmes and the footmen in the courtyard that they too could join their merry-making companions. The truce was both general and genuine.

Then I put on a cape with a hood and Prendick and I left the Palace. We walked down the several levels of narrow rose-tinged houses to the hospital. There was a smell of rum on the morning breeze, and children ran down the cobbles and darted in and out of doorways, shouting. Most of them paid no heed at all to the deformities with which they had been born — unless of course their legs or feet had been affected, in which cases they sat on stoops and window sills where their parents had placed them and shouted as insistently as the others. The children with untouched bodies seemed to have the grimmest faces; they played with the quiet determination of soldiers.

Prendick and I said nothing to either the children or the adults.

At Hospitaler House we got immediately to business.

The day had come to release Serenos into the waters of Pretty Coal Sack. For five days Prendick had refrained from administering any sort of sedative or stimulant to his creation, and he believed that a further delay in this final test would serve no purpose but the continuation of our anxiety. I said, "It's now very much a question of sink or swim, isn't it?" but Prendick was either too distracted or too well-bred to respond. In any case, we had no more opportunities for humor, however feeble or strained, for the duration of that protracted Christmas morning and afternoon.

The long experiment failed.

We placed the tank of sea water containing Serenos in a pressure chamber that was sometimes used by divers. We closed the weighted inner door and introduced enough water to fill the chamber completely — so that our pseudoshark could swim effortlessly out of the tank, free of all artificial restrains but the iron-grey walls of the pressure chamber itself. Then we opened the outer door, commanded it to swim with measured slowness into the still, cathedral-solemn depths of Pretty Coal Sack. We felt our heartbeats echoing solemnly in the conches of our ears. We waited for our patchwork primeval ichthyoid to float free of the shadow of the pressure chamber and into the boundless sun-warmed sea beyond

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the sunken surgical hall's giant portal. We waited by the cold glass. We waited for the appearance of the thing we loved and hated, our hands clammy with salt sweat.

At last, the narrow misbegotten body of Serenos dropped laterally through the shadowed waters toward us. It moved its tail and fins with no enthusiasm, no beauty, no apparent purpose. And then it turned its sleek grey-and-blue-marbled flank to the glass behind which we stood and slid down this nearly frictionless surface to a height exactly on a line with our eyes. Here the creature hung, flank pressed against the glass, one piggish unblinking eye staring without hope or love into our wide illuminated sanctuary. The seas of the world stretched away behind it, like so many disregarded suitors, but only the perfunctory movement of the raw pectoral fin betrayed that Serenos was still alive to rebuff these lovers more.

Then even that movement ceased, and Serenos died.

Created without an air bladder, as all sharks are necessarily created, the pseudoshark canted to one side, suffered a spasm throughout the length of its trunk, and drifted away toward the bottom of Pretty Coal Sack, spiraling down in dreamy slow motion.

When Serenos had disappeared, Prendick and I looked at each other in silence and then turned away from the window. Three months of our lives we had spent in this enterprise, no inconsequential portion of the time a man has allotted to him. Prendick sat down and wept.

I thought, *And is it thus that we have finally avenged the death of a daughter and a wife? What manner of beast are we?*

It is the Year of Our Lost Lord 5309. Or so we believe. From the sea we came, and to the sea we eventually return. There is very little more to tell in this account of our exile in the terra-cotta city of Windfall Last.

On the day after our failure with Serenos I abdicated my position as Navarch and thereby forestalled the inevitable assassination attempt. I did not take this action out of cowardice. Too many other factors influenced me.

The first of these was the knowledge that no emissary to the Parfects, no matter who he was, would alter their ultimate judgment upon mankind. Under no circumstances would I go again to Azteca Nueva; under no circumstances would I offer myself up as the ritual scapegoat of a species doomed from the very moment of its prehistoric inception, particularly when my own sacrifice — just like that of

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another long before me — would signify nothing, would mark the waste of still another spirit yearning toward the unattainable. For that reason and others, I abdicated. How could I face the Parfects after my part in Serenos' mutilation and murder?

Instead, I have settled upon another course of action, one that appeals to the tenets of my aesthetic and moral feelings.

Tomorrow morning in the sunken theater of surgery, I am to go under Prendick's knife. He has already agreed to my plan, and his insane dedication to the rationale behind it will see him through the disconcerting early stages of my metamorphosis. Later, when my resemblance to a shark has grown more and more faithful, he will forget altogether that inside the tapered head resides the essence and the intellect of his own son-in-law. He will not fail with me as we failed with Serenos — from that failure Prendick learned too much, his hands derived too many unconscious skills.

And three months hence I will go with supple zeal into the waters of the Atlantic, no more a man.

I am convinced that we are the freaks of the universe; we were never meant to be. In our natures there is an improper balance of stardust and dross, too much of one, too little of the other — but not enough of either to give us the perfection of the extreme.

My entire life has been a struggle to achieve that which the universe long ago decreed we might not achieve. I have been living with the delusions of the evolutionary mistake of which I am a product. But no more. Tomorrow morning I am tacking about into the indifferent winds of the cosmos and altering my course. Though perfection is denied me in the direction of the westward seas, I will attain it by swinging toward the dawn. God! even now the salt is in my blood and the power of a shark's primordial lust surges through my heart and loins!

I will swim against the current.

I will seek out the channel that cuts beneath the Galleon of the Hesperides and beach myself among the flowers. There I will die, knowing that the white otters will observe my death and scramble into the sea — aghast at so much unprincipled might.

And my death will be more honest than any single instance of a good man's piety.

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The topic of sex seems to bring out the worst in a lot of us: embarrassment, 1930's obviousness, and the assumption that just mentioning love-making is somehow funny. Joseph Elder's introduction to Eros In Orbit contains such phrases as "the pleasures of the flesh," "carnal love," "the age-old itch," and the question "Where will it all end?" which only occurs to nervous Americans when they don't know where a lot of other societies have already been. Thomas Scortia is also seized with editorial coyness; he perpetrates "hypermammiferous females" and "raunchy writers...like naughty schoolboys." These are symptoms of embarrassment, i.e. the assimilation of novelty.

Both anthologies range from the fine to the awful. (By the way, it's good to see publishing houses like Trident, Random House, and Scribners getting into science fiction.) Anthologies "about" this or that theme are bound to be uneven, especially in science fiction where the "topic" is only ostensible — e.g. Philip Jose Farmer's "The Lovers" is really a story of alien mimicry like Avram Davidson's "Or All the Seas with Oysters," and Theodore Sturgeon's "The World Well Lost" (which is reprinted in *Strange Bedfellows*) is not about homosexuality *per se*, but about the

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Books

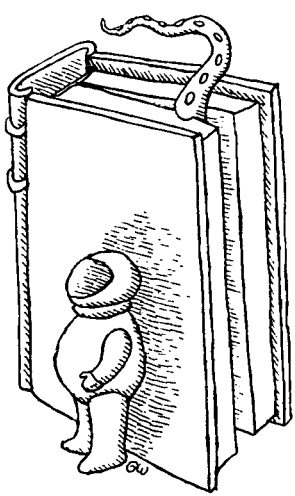
Eros In Orbit: A Collection of All New Science Fiction Stories About Sex, ed. Joseph Elder, Trident Press, $6.95

Strange Bedfellows: Sex and Science Fiction, ed. Thomas N. Scortia, Random House, $5.95

The Iron Dream by Norman Spinrad, Avon, $.95

The Listeners by James Gunn, Scribners, $6.95

Dying Inside by Robert Silverberg, Scribners, $6.95



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effects of enforced secrecy on the human soul. If the anthologies are uneven I suspect the topic is at fault; sex is both endlessly interesting and very hard to write about. Either writers succumb to social taboos and write hartyhars or they break the taboos and are so dazzled by the mere fact of having done so that they manage to express only the most obvious science fiction ideas. Most of the stories in both books don't get beyond the idea of mechanical substitutes for sex — gadgets or android partners or recordings. There is practically no group sex, no promiscuity rendered genuinely and from the inside, and (except for the Sturgeon reprint) no homosexuality. Alien-human love fares a little better, but the only new attempt at perversion, technically speaking, is a story about paedophilia* which studiously avoids showing any. *Bedfellows* (half reprint, half new stories) is the more thoughtful anthology, illustrating James Blish's dictum that ideas alone are worthless; what counts is ideas *about* ideas. Sex, like all primary experiences, can be named directly but not described directly; one can only describe its effect on people, its experiential dimension, so to speak. In the newness of taboo-breaking, many writers forget this, and the result is descriptions of love-making which are interchangeable from story to story. What matters is not organ grinding but the explosions sex produces in the head; some writers in the anthologies know this. Most are learning. Some are hopeless.

The best new story in *Eros* (either book, really) is Robert Silverberg's "In the Group" which deals with a splendidly pathological future of group-sex (actually they use mechanical telepathy) and the one monogamous throwback who can't fit in, the sort of thing Kingsley Amis once called conservatively progressive. The protagonist's present-day attitudes are never explained (the story's one flaw) but moment-to-moment rendering of experience is fine, especially the joyless priggishness of that wretched Group from which the obsessed hero finally flees. Silverberg's prose very occcasionally slips ("taut globes") but at its best it's very good — "her jolly slithers and slides" or the Group's "olla podrida of copulations." Good also is Ron Goulart's "Whistler" which one might call a tragedy of misfitting morals to situation, except that Goulart's style is far too cool, detached, and comic to merit such a heated definition. It's the usual blend of the homey and the freaky; in this conventional world in which

*Not love of feet (which you might suspect) but love of children.

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businessmen leave their middle-aged wives lonely in Westport the heroine buys a mechanical hand called Wakzoff for the hero; she says, "If you love someone, you give them things." Goulart Man finally does in slender, intense Goulart Woman, a hopeful sign that Goulart may be moving into new territory. George Zebrowski's "Starcrossed," another fine story, is too genuinely science-fictionally far-out to summarize easily; in essense it's a love affair between two parts of a cyborg brain. It's the only story in both books to realize the sense of the subjectively erotic; Zebrowski knows that the experience of sex can only be approached through its effects, and when he writes of the "awesome reliability and domination" of the sex act he's closer to the real thing than all the thighs and globes in the world. There are other stories in the book that have a touch of this, especially Gordon Eklund's "Lovemaker" with its exploration of an android consciousness (for which sex is the only real act in the world) and Barry Malzberg's "Ups and Downs," with its first-rate Malzbergian grasp of a certain kind of mental process (though I wish he'd cross into new territory, as he's done a lot of the same thing lately). Pamela Sargent's "Clone Sister" and Ed Bryant's "2.46593" are fairly good, and there are three failures: Thomas Scortia's "Flowering Narcissus" (a Hell's Angel Mama is not a Hell's Angel with estrogen added but a very different personality type — nor is the H.A. in the story anything more than a stereotype); John Stopa's "Kiddy-Lib" which is an even worse example of a middle-class outsider's idea of hippies, old men who letch after little girls, and children themselves (the schematic shifting of counters doesn't help), all with a careful evasion of the real subject; and Thomas Brand's "Don Slow," an incoherent farce-parody which not only believes that prostitutes are nymphomaniacs and homosexuals limp-wristed sissies, but (worse) does not know that parody must restrict itself to one target and farce must not invent new plot zigzags whenever it has plot problems.

The best stories in *Bedfellows* are reprints: Theodore Sturgeon's loverbird story and Philip Jose Farmer's classic "Mother." The Sturgeon story worries the editor, who reassures you that Theodore Sturgeon is "virile," "sexual," and "devoutly heterosexual." (He also has "a fierce beard."). The relationship in the story is far more bizarre than Mr. Scortia even suspects; if mere homosexuality frightens him, what would he make of the intense, secret romanticism that is the real subject? Brian

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Aldiss's "Lambeth Blossom," a splendid playing with reality, seems to be a reprint, although I haven't seen it before (maybe England?) as is Reginald Bretnor's "Doctor Birdmouse," a well-done story that tries to present loneliness and sexual frustration as funny. In truth Mr. Bretnor doesn't believe it, but his real theme is too Godawfully horrifying to treat straight — though I think the idea began as a gentle whimsicality; his Miss Cowturtle sounds very like Teniel's Mock Turtle in *Alice in Wonderland.* But Mr. Bretnor is too good a writer not to feel the grimness of his alien/human mating joke. The lyricism of Laurence Yep's "Looking Glass Sea" presents the positive side of love between species with its marvelously strange silicon/crystalline world, and George Zebrowski's "First Love, First Fear" (although a little too long) shows what can be done with "rationalized" fantasy (a major source of s.f.). The biology is flawed (what is an alien doing with mammaries when her babies eat their way out of her like insect babies?) but the story creates authentic strangeness and springs from real sexual feelings (the fear-attraction of inexperience). The formidable Silverberg is present with "Push No More," a fine, awful, comic portrait of the same fourteen-year-old seen from a very different perspective ("suave as a pig" and his pimples light up like beacons when he blushes), although the story is written from the wrong point of view — there is too much of a split between the teller and what he must describe, i.e. himself. Another good story is "False Dawn," one of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's series about her future-disaster world, which contains (among other things) a rape told from the point of view of the victim — it's not good clean fun, kiddies. Not as accomplished but equally interesting stories are Jack Dann's "I'm With You in Rockland" and Mel Gilden's "What About Us Grils," the most science-fictionally far-out stories in the book. The first expresses alienation from one's body in a metaphor-made-literal that is pure s.f. — this is the kind of originality both anthologies could use more of — and the second captures something of the effect of what-on-earth-do-they-see-in-each-other, one of the legitimate effects of s.f. sex, especially in the very last paragraph. Failures (and some are awful) include a slight anecdote by Walt Leibscher ("Do Androids Dream of Electric Love?"); the oddly inconclusive "Genetic Faux Pas" by Harvey Bilker, which probably had more point in its original context; "Dinner at Helen's" by William Carlson,

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another middle-class conventional pretense at unisex and hippidom; G.A. Alpher's "The Mechanical Sweetheart," a talented but derivative (Nabokov) and overwritten piece — grotesquerie is not as easily come by as that, although the ending picks up; and four hartyhars, the dimmest of which is Joe Gores' "The Criminal," which ought to have been left to languish pornographically in *Adam,* from which it came. Mr. Gores thinks rape is chucklesome; he ought to read Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's story. Miriam Allen deFord's "The Daughter of the Tree" is pleasant, but it's not s.f. and doesn't belong here.

Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* is really a science fiction novel by Adolf Hitler called *Lord of The Swastika* but Avon copped out. Spinrad has been trying to convict humanity of sin for some time now; here he finally does it. Lord is a changeling that Spinrad has plopped into our sword-and-sorcery cradle and the damned creature is so close to the real thing that we can't disown it. The narcissism, the beautifully done self-righteousness, the preoccupation with clothes and gear, the magical ease of victory, the screamingly funny phallic obsession — it's all there, so exciting that you can't help enjoying it and so Godawful that you ought to hate yourself for it. There are patches of pure fun, but by some eerie artistry Hitler's novel is both serious and seriously written. Moreover the book is a fascinating, genuine, alternative universe — part of this is in Hitler's novel (which is itself a garbled account of Hitler's real rise to power) and part in the blurbs, the Afterword (by Homer Whipple, New York, N.Y., 1959), the puffs on the back, and the list of Hitler's other novels, which segue slowly from *Emperor of the Asteroids* to *Tomorrow the World.* As Michael Moorcock, the famous sword-and-sorcery writer, comments on the back cover, "This exciting and tense fantasy adventure...is bound to earn Hitler the credit he so richly deserves!" A lovely book, and a deserved crack on the knuckles of more than just sword-and-sorcery addicts.

When will science fiction learn that we love it for itself alone? James Gunn's *The Listeners* is two books, a wonderful science fiction novel (concentrated in sections called *Computer Run* and some of the scientific work on the novel's Project to communicate with extra-terrestrial civilizations) and carefully variegated impossible people who all have their faith in life revived by the Project (five of them!) and go drearily through

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"human interest" situations, e.g. lonely wifehood, father-son conflict, etc. Periodically we have to sit still for this "human" stuff — it's not inept or crude, just dead — to be rewarded by the following (the static of space):

> He turned the knob once more, and the sound was a babble of distant voices, some shouting, some screaming, some conversing calmly, some whispering — all of them trying beyond desperation to communicate, and everything just below the level of intelligibility. If he closed his eyes, MacDonald could almost see their faces, pressed against a distant screen, distorted with the awful effort to make themselves heard and understood. (*p. 18*)

This is the subject. This is the soul of the book. The rest is flubdub. If Scribners insisted on it, Scribners must learn, and if part of Mr. Gunn insisted on it, *he* must learn. The good parts are so good that the bad become insupportable — there are real scientific quotations (which give the effect of a dialogue between real scientists who have in fact never met) and catalogs of star names and other wonders, and then there are silly things you could pick up in any kind of routine fiction. Despite this, and despite the plethora of literary quotations (no writers ought to expose their own prose to that kind of comparison) the book is good enough to be worth reading. But it hurts.

Robert Silverberg's *Dying Inside* is a dry, often witty, low-keyed, realistic novel about a present-day telepath who is losing his gift (the only thing that makes his life worthwhile), as close to mainstream realism as science fiction can get without moving out of s.f. altogether. Telepathy (reception only) is presented as a kind of addiction, something like a schizoid inner life. I find the book interesting but not moving; I suspect I'm just not on its wavelength and that readers who are will react to it as heavy tragedy (which it is). Everything in it is present in fine detail: the psychoanalytic-Jewish milieu, the overly bright child, the lying parents, the dreadful closeness which is paradoxically linked to lovelessness and isolation. Unlike the quick, flashy bizarrerie of most s.f., *Dying* has the density and length of a realistic novel (which essentially it is). One might quarrel with the subject (this kind of hero is common in recent mainstream fiction) or with some of the writing (there's occasional redundancy and the book could've benefited from a final careful trim),

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but the solidity of it is beyond question, as is the quality. It's also the first time Mr. Silverberg has used his extraordinary wit in print, e.g.:

> In those days there was an old cast-iron kiosk at street level marking the entrance to the depths; it was positioned between two lanes of traffic, and students, their absent minds full of Kierkegaard and Sophocles and Fitzgerald, were forever stepping in front of cars and getting killed. Now the kiosk is gone and the subway entrances are placed more rationally, on the sidewalks. (*p. 7*)

In my February 1971 column I mentioned a book called *The Way It Spozed To Be* and (as usual) got my references wrong. The book is by James Herndon and is the record of his one year's teaching in a metropolitan ghetto school. It's a good book but it is not (as I called it) a collection of writing done by Harlem schoolchildren. I would appreciate any information about such a collection which, as I remember, did come out at about that time.

CLARION WRITERS' WORKSHOP

The Clarion East SF-Writers Workshop will be held at Michigan State University this summer. The workshop will run from July 1 through August 11, 1973. Writers-in-residence will be Ben Bova, Harlan Ellison, Damon Knight, Theodore Sturgeon, Kate Wilhelm and Robin Scott Wilson. For further details and application forms write to: Dr. Leonard Isaacs, Justin Morrill College, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48823.

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C. L. Grant's first published story was "The House of Evil," F&SF, December 1968. Since then, he tells us, "I've sold material to *Orbit, Infinity* and *The Little Magazine.* I've acquired a Burmese named Egham, a fiancee named Debbie and a car named the Blue Bitch. As for 'Come Dance With Me...,' it began in a place called Qui Nhon and ended in a place called Budd Lake. If nothing else, it helped get that war out of my system."

Come Dance With Me On My Pony's Grave

by C. L. GRANT

November, and an aged slate sky; a wind snapping across the fields like a bullwhip and cracking around a golden brown house that squatted warmly on the grey landscape.

Aaron, huddled in a winter-worn and crimson jacket, was slumped, seemingly relaxed, against the jamb of the open front door, his hands flat in his pockets. His eyes were narrowed against the wind, and they shifted quickly along the partially wooded horizon, blurring the Dakota spruce and pine to a green-and-grey smear of almost preternatural fear. Behind him the house was empty, and silent. There was only the wind and an occasional wooden creak.

He shivered.

Suddenly an explosive gust caught him unprepared and shoved him off balance; a magazine was blown to the floor in the living room, and a shade snapped against glass. Reluctantly he closed the door and cut off the warmth from his back. His lips twisted into a half smile. A good thing Miriam's not here, he thought as his mind mimicked her laughing scold: Aaron Jackoson, what do you think we are — Eskimos? Just look at my curtains blown all over, and the cold, Aaron, the cold... He grinned, shook his head and closed his eyes briefly to allow her face to flash before him reassuringly. The wind gusted again, and his smile faded. Come home, Miriam, he thought (nearly prayed), come home soon — the boy frightens me yet.

Then he resettled himself to wait, arms folded and pressed tightly against his chest. He squinted into the cold, his eyes moving, moving as they had once

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been trained to do, watching and waiting...

...under a multigreen canopy of broad leaves, twisted vines and knee-high, waist-high brush beside the paths he and his men rarely used as they climbed for hours through the bugs sweat heat dirt world. A ragged clearing ahead where the village so often visited was hidden, and the smoke-skinned, half-naked Montagnards who gave them the news that the enemy had long since fled — all save one who, this time, belonged to them, not the soldiers. Water, then, with iodine tablets to kill the bacteria, and orange flavoring to kill the taste. While he watched the jungle and his men relaxed, finally. And the boy — eight, perhaps nine — stood by a black patch of earth where several men were racing the sun, digging what looked to be a grave. A shout...

...and Aaron blinked and watched a slight figure break from the trees and zigzag swiftly across the field, arms waving wildly in greeting. He grinned and, pushing himself away from the house, limped heavily toward the fence as grass crackled sharply beneath his feet. He shivered and wondered how the boy had managed to adapt so rapidly to the four seasons so radically different from the hot and not-so-hot of the mountain jungles.

At last the boy reached the yard and with a melodramatic gasp draped himself over the faded white rail, his face darker, but not red, from exertion.

"Hey, dad."

"Hey, yourself."

"Boy, am I ... bushed?"

Aaron nodded. "Bushed, pooped, beat, tired ... in fact, you look like all of them rolled into one." He was tempted to ask where his adopted son had been, and thought better of it. "Come on inside, David and get yourself warm. Your mother'll kill me if she finds I let you catch cold the minute she decides to go visiting."

The boy was thirteen and still quite short (would never be much taller), and as he dashed back to the house ahead of his father, his long straight black hair whipped his shoulders and the air, while Aaron watched carefully for hints of the past until he realized what he was doing and scolded himself silently for behaving like a damned fool. The boy, he insisted to his shadow, was an American now. But he could not help the growing feeling that, without Miriam, David thought of him only as the lieutenant who took him away. He glanced back at the trees and shut the door.

"Sit down, dad," David called from the kitchen. "I'll make you some hot tea. Did mother call today?"

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"Yes, I'm afraid she already has," he answered. "About ten, ten thirty. You were out with Pinto, I think."

"Nuts."

Aaron laughed and, after shucking his coat, stretched out on the sofa, letting the room draw the cold from his skin to die in the dark glow of the beams and paneled walls. And everywhere, the scent of Miriam.

Then he heard a cup shatter, and he sighed when David, none too quietly, began muttering to himself. "Hey, in there," he shouted. "We speak English in this house, remember?"

The boy poked his head out of the kitchen and grinned broadly. "Sorry, dad, but that's all I remember any more."

"The swearing?"

"But, dad, they're the best kind, don't you know? I heard the GIs use them all the time."

There was a sharp silence before David finally giggled and thrust out an open hand. "Look, dad, I was only counting. I don't remember any more than that, honest." He waited a moment, staring, then frowned and disappeared.

Now that's got to be a crime, Aaron thought, recalling all the tedious, impatient hours he had spent scraping together enough of the tribe's language to make himself, and his mission, understood; there were still a few isolated words and phrases that returned to him when he pressed, yet the boy had forgotten a lifetime. So he said. Once, when Aaron had been feeling particularly moody over his crippled leg, he had asked David if he minded being away from his old home, toppled through a sargasso of red tape and interviews into a country and life style as alien to the boy as the jungle was to Aaron. David had smiled, a little softly, and shook his head. But the black eyes were expressionless; they always had been since the death of his father.

"Hey, dad! Quit daydreaming, please? This stuff is hot."

Aaron smiled and took the steaming cup from the offered tray. David sat cross-legged on the rug, watching intently as Aaron tasted the tea and nodded his approval. "Your mother," he said, "will be jealous."

David finally returned the smile, then turned his head toward the bay window as if he were plotting the darkening sky, listening for the invisible wind. He squirmed. Coughed. Aaron amused himself with the boy's impatience as long as he could; then, softly, "Pinto must be starving. Is he on a diet or something?"

And the boy was gone. To a pony named Pinto, horse enough

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for a youngster who would never be tall, not even average. They had both arrived on the same day, and five years later they were inseparable. Wild, Aaron thought. Both of them.

The telephone shrilled. Aaron grunted away a cramp that knifed his mine-shattered leg as he headed into the hallway and picked up the receiver.

"Jackoson, that you?"

Aaron winced. "Yes, Mr. Sorrentino, it's me."

"Damned good thing. Want to tell you those wolves are back again. Went after two of my rams this morning. Saw them. Big as horses they were. Chased them into the woods, I did." Right to my place, Aaron thought bitterly, thanks a lot. "I got a shot at them."

"You what?"

"Said I got a shot at them."

"Damn it, Sorrentino, my boy was playing there today. You know he always —"

"Did I hit him?" The voice was singularly unconcerned.

"Christ, no! If you had, do you think I'd be —"

"Then don't worry about it, Jackoson. I'm a perfect shot. I hit what I aim at. That kid —"

"My son."

"— won't get hurt, don't you worry about that. But one thing, Jackoson... I, uh, don't want to make any trouble, you understand, but I wish you would straighten out your kid about where your property ends. Him and that damn pony scare hell out of my sheep."

"If I didn't know you better, Mr. Sorrentino, I'd be tempted to think that you were somehow trying to threaten me."

A raucous laugh and a harsh gasping for breath. Aaron wanted to spit at the phone. "Just wanted you to know, Jackoson, don't get so worked up. You soldier boys get excited too easy."

"I just don't like the tone of your voice, Sorrentino."

"So sue me," Sorrentino said, and hung up.

Aaron breathed deeply and grabbed the edge of the hall table. "I could kill you so easily, Mr. Franklin Sorrentino," he said to the wall. "So goddamned easily."

"Dad?"

Aaron spun around to face the boy standing in the hall...

...standing by the gash of a grave while the jungle severed the sun's scattered light and a pit fire substituted shadows for trees. Lt. Jackoson shifted uneasily on the ground and lighted a cigarette as the boy stared at him. There was no recognition in the black bullet eyes though the man and the boy had often played together whenever the squad came to stay and use the friendly village as a base. Now Jackoson saw only a new, weary

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emptiness, and deeper: a purpose. The grave was for the boy's father, the shaman of the tribe...

...the boy's voice was quiet. "I don't like him, dad." The words spun high, and Aaron shivered a remembrance while he stood in the tunnel-dark hall. David moved as silently as he spoke. Even on the Shetland he was noiseless — in the early days, when the boy was still learning, Miriam had said : he's like a ghost, Aaron, and he frightens me. In the early days. There were still remnants of the mountain in him, but Miriam no longer saw them. "He's greedy, dad, and doesn't...feel for things."

Aaron nodded, just barely stopping himself from patting the boy on the head. He had learned early that "sin" was too weak a word for such a gesture. Instead, he grabbed his shoulders. "Go watch some TV, son. Forget it. It's not worth worrying yourself."

They walked, the son just behind, into the living room and dimmed the lights. Before Aaron switched on the set, David curled into a corner chair where the age in his voice belied his thin body. "Why doesn't he like me, dad?"

Aaron knew this was not a time to smile away a question. Five years before, his greatest fear had been what the other youngsters would think of his adopted son, but the smoke-grey skin and the hint of Polynesia in his features had given him instant acceptance, especially with the girls; David, however, was only always superficially friendly. "I don't know, son. Perhaps he's lonely with no children of his own, and that wife of his is enough for any man."

"He thinks I'm different." The tone said: he knows I'm different, and you're afraid that maybe he's right.

"Perhaps."

"I don't like him."

"David, he's not going to be the only one in your life to think you're...well, not the same as others. You're quite a unique young man."

"He hates Pinto. He say, last week when he run me away, it was a silly name for a horse. Pinto doesn't like him either. He try to kick his stomach once."

"Oh." Aaron, forgetting to correct the boy's English, thought he was beginning to understand Sorrentino's surliness.

"He missed."

In spite of himself, Aaron said, "Too bad."

The boy laughed quietly.

"Listen, David, Mr. Sorrentino doesn't really understand how you can... can *be* with animals. Most boys... do you know what rapport means?"

"No, dad, but I think I can make guesses."

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"Well, good. Rapport, you see, isn't always explainable. Sometimes it's something that just happens or belongs to a way of life that people just can't grasp. Like..." and he stopped, thought and decided not to mention the shaman. "And, if you don't mind me asking," he said instead, falsely lighter, "why did you name him Pinto?"

David laughed again. "It suits him."

"How? He's all brown?"

"It feels right, dad. It suits him. He runs and leaps and... he's like me in many ways. His name is right."

"Well, Sorrentino can't understand that, son."

"I know. He doesn't .. feel. I don't like him."

Aaron frowned in concentration, seeking the speeches that would stifle the hatred he knew the boy was feeling. It was wrong to allow this to fester, wrong not to show the boy that some men must be tolerated, that, as the saying goes, it takes all kinds. He tried, but he took too long.

"I'm going to bed, dad. Good night." David uncurled from the chair, stayed out of the light until his bedroom door closed behind him. Always closed. Sanctum.

Aaron hesitated in following, then sat again. For the first time since they had been together, David had lied to him. So blatantly, in fact, that its very obviousness pained more than the deceit itself. The language. He knew David had not forgotten all but the numbers. Once in a while, from behind the door, a muttering filtered through the house and filled him with dreams. Songs chanted on horseback across the fields and through the half-light in the pines; the whisperings to the animals. Black hair and black eyes and a strength in slender arms that contradicted their frailty. Montagnard. Mountain dweller. Outcast.

Christ! he thought and chided himself for allowing his mind to become so morbid. The weather, his leg and Miriam's absence were getting to be too much. He decided to call her first thing in the morning and ask her to cut her visit short. Her mother wasn't that lonely, and he needed her laughter.

He dozed fitfully until the telephone twisted him stiffly from the couch. His watch had stopped. He stood, scratching his head vigorously, then stretched his arms over his head. "All right," he mumbled. "All right, all right, for god's sake." *Daylight,* he thought in amazement. That little dope didn't even wake me so I could sleep in a bed; how the hell did I oversleep? Glancing at the front window, he noticed streaks on the glass and the shimmer of ice on the

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walk. Rain, freezing rain was the last thing he needed with David pouting and his wife gone. For a moment he was ready to let the phone ring and crawl into bed to hide. The house and that damned phone were making him nervous.

Still rubbing the sleep from his face, he leaned awkwardly against the wall and snatched up the receiver. "Yeah, yeah, Jackoson here."

"Aaron, this here is Will."

He stiffened. "Yes, sheriff, what can I do for you?" There were excited noises in the background; a man was bellowing angrily.

"I'm over at the Sorrentino place. You'd better get over here."

"David?"

"No, nothing's happened to the boy. But Sorrentino accidently shot the pony. He's dead."

"I'll be right there." No thought, then, only an endless stream of cursing accusations: half in relief for his son's safety, half in anger at the rancher's murder of the boy's pet. His coat, first jamming on its hanger, refused to slide on easily. The pickup stalled twice. He shook uncontrollably, and his leg throbbed.

The truck skidded on the icy road, but Aaron, barely aware that he was driving at all, ignored the warning. Twice in two days he had wanted to kill, and twice he was unashamed for it.

There were two town patrol cars parked on the shoulder of the road when he arrived, and he nearly ran up the back of one as he slid to a halt and scrambled out. There was a small crowd hunched coldly in the vast, well-tended yard: police, several neighbors looking ill-at-ease, Sorrentino himself pounding his arms against the air by the sheriff, and David standing quietly to one side...

...while the oldest men carefully lowered the body of the shaman into the oversized grave. They scuttled away, then, and the boy stepped up to drop in the trappings of his father's profession, a lock of his own hair, a brown seed, a young branch freshly cut. They buried the war-murdered man beneath black earth and passed the remainder of the night mourning. Lt. Jackoson continued to watch the boy — a one-time, now distant friend. He watched the boy sitting calmly on the grave, staring at the prisoner, a scarred man in a tattered blue uniform. Jackoson had warned his men to mind their own business this time, and they did, gratefully; but few slept and all were uneasy. And still the little boy stared...

...at the ground until Aaron placed an arm lightly around his shoulders and he looked up. No greeting. A look was all. Sheriff Jenkins, a scowl and sympathy fighting in his face, walked

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hurriedly over with Sorrentino directly behind him. Aaron glared at them, barely able to contain the rage he felt for his son. "How?" he demanded without preliminaries. Sorrentino tried to bull forward, but Jenkins held up a hand to stop him.

"Frank here called me about forty-five minutes ago, Aaron. Said he was afraid he'd shot your son."

"I was just inside the wood, Jackoson," Sorrentino said, his voice oddly harsh. "I was chasing them wolves. I heard this noise right where I spotted them last, so I let go —"

"Without being sure?" Momentarily, Aaron was too appalled at the big man's stupidity to be angry. "You know kids are playing in there all the time. My God, Frank, you're a good enough shot to have waited a..." He stopped, seeing the retreat in the other man's eyes. "You..." He shook his head to clear it. "You... no, you couldn't have. Not even you."

"Now wait a damn minute, Jackoson."

"Shut up a minute, Frank."

"But, sheriff, that man just accused me of deliberately killing that kid's animal!"

"He didn't say that, did he?"

Sorrentino sputtered, then wheeled and stalked away, muttering. Jenkins didn't watch him leave; Aaron did. "Listen, Aaron, I couldn't find any evidence that it happened any other way than he said. I know how you two feel about each other, but as far as I'm concerned, his story holds up. I'm sorry, Aaron, but it was an accident."

Aaron nodded, though he was just as sure the sheriff was wrong.

"Look, if you want, the boys and I will take the —"

"No," David said.

Aaron saw the look on Jenkins' face and knew it was the first thing David had said that morning. Against his better judgment he agreed. "We'll take him, Will. But thanks anyway. I'd appreciate it if some of your men would help me put him in the truck."

The sheriff started to say something, but the boy walked between them, past the neighbors to the truck where he let down the gate and stood by, waiting.

"The boy wasn't on the pony," Will said. "It must have wandered off while Davie was playing."

Aaron nodded. And what, he thought, was David playing?

Pinto's head had been hastily wrapped in a blanket now matted with blood. David sat stroking the the animal's rigid flank. Through the rear-view mirror, Aaron could see the hand moving smoothly over the cooling flresh. In his own eyes were the stirrings of tears. For once he thought he knew how the boy

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felt, to lose a friend much more than a pet. He drove slowly, turning off the road just before his own land began. There was a rutted path leading into the wood to a clearing where the boys of the surrounding farms had erected forts and castles, trenches and space ships. At its western end was a slight rise, and it was there that they sweated in the cold noon of the grey slate day and buried Pinto. The wind was listless, the rain stopped. When the grave was filled, Aaron walked painfully back to the truck to wait for David, and an hour passed before they were headed for home, and all the way Aaron tried vainly to joke the boy back into a fair humor, even promising him a new pet as soon as they could get into town. David, however, only stared at the road, one hand unconsciously working at his throat.

Immediately they arrived at the house, the telephone rang and Aaron grabbed for it, hoping it was Miriam. It was Sorrentino, apologizing and sounding unsettlingly desperate; and Aaron, eager to talk, eager to turn from his son's depression, profusely acknowledged the other's story, and damned himself as he spoke. Sorrentino kept on. And on. He was babbling, Aaron realized, very often incoherent, and in his puzzlement at the rancher's behavior, he responded in kind, knowing he sounded like an idiot, trying not to admit that he was somehow, inexplicably afraid of his own son.

When Sorrentino at last rang off, Aaron felt rather than saw the boy's bedroom door open. He would not turn. He was not going to watch grief harden the young face. "It'll be all right, son," he said weakly. "In time. In time. You...you have to give it time."

The boy was a shadow. "He could see, dad."

"We can't prove that, son."

"He could see everything. The brush isn't that high."

"David, we cannot prove it. Things are different here, you know that. We have to prove things first."

And still he did not turn.

"He did it on purpose. You know that, and you won't do anything. You know it and..."

Turn around you old fool. He's only a boy. He's only a boy, for God's sake...

...for God's sake, the lieutenant thought as he watched the boy sitting on the grave, how long is he going to stay there? His eyes, burning from the darkness and the fire's acrid smoke, shifted to the prisoner. The man was staring at the shaman's son, entranced, it seemed, and unmoving. He was unbound, but none of the

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tribesmen seemed to care. They were confident with knowledge that Jackoson didn't have, and Jackoson didn't like it. He tried instead to think of home and a place where people behaved the way they were supposed to...

...behave yourself, stupid, he thought, and send the boy to bed. He'll feel better in the morning.

"You'd better lie down, now, dad," the shadow said. "Your leg must be hurting after all that digging."

Aaron closed his eyes and nodded, feeling for the first time since leaving the house eons ago the painful strain that nearly buckled him. A moment later he felt the boy's arm around his waist, guiding him firmly to the bedroom. In the dim curtained light, he watched David prepare the bed, then stand aside while he eased himself between the cold sheets. David smiled at him.

"We'll...we'll see the sheriff again in a few days, son. We'll talk to him."

"Sure, dad."

"And David, don't...I mean, you know, don't try to do anything on your own, you know what I mean? I mean, don't go off chasing his sheep into the next county or smashing windows. Okay?"

The boy paused in the doorway. "Sure, dad. You want your medicine?"

"No, thanks. I'll be all right in a little while. Just call me for dinner."

"Okay. I'm going to read or something. You need anything, please call."

Aaron smiled. "Go on, son." And after the door closed, he wondered, not for the first time, if he had been right in taking the boy away. Neither, in half a decade, seemed closer to understanding the other than when they had started out on the plane from Saigon. They spoke the same language, shared the same house, but the rapport David had with the animals, with Pinto, was missing between father and son. The war was no longer a threat, its use as a bond had dissolved.

I don't know my own son, he thought.

A part of his mind told him to stop feeling sorry for himself: the problem wasn't a new one.

I'm not feeling sorry for myself.

You sound like one of Miriam's soap operas.

I don't.

He's an ordinary boy who needs time. He's seen war.

He's had five years, and so, by the way, have I.

And when he slept, he dreamt of a slight mound in a path supposedly cleared and the sound he felt and heard before waking screaming in a hospital in Japan

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with a leg raw and twisted. He had refused amputation. He needed the leg.

When he opened his eyes, it was dark. He tried to fall asleep again, but a rising wind nudged him back to wakefulness. Finally he swung out of bed and dressed quietly. He was hungry and thirsty. Cautiously, he crept into the kitchen to fix a snack and unaccountably remembered a rancher he knew in passing who had a string of Shetlands he rented to pony rides during the summer fairs. Maybe, he thought, he could persuade this man to part with one of his animals on credit. It would be easy enough to explain what had happened to Pinto. The man would have to help him. Slowly the idea grew, hurrying his actions, making him grin at himself. Without stopping to drink the coffee he had poured, he hastened down the hall to David's room.

It was empty. His boots were gone, and his jacket. There was a hint of panic before Aaron realized that David, still mourning, had probably gone out to the barn to Pinto's stall. Snatching his coat from the closet, he rushed outside, gasping once at the cold air and the strong wind that slid across the now-frozen ground. A digging pain in his thigh caused him to slow up, but long before he'd fling open the barn door, he knew the building would be empty. He stood in the barnyard, aimlessly turning, seeking a direction to travel until he saw the faint orange glow over the trees. He stared, hands limp at his sides, squinting, thinking, denying all the fears that founded his nightmares. He knew his century and still refused to believe what he had seen on the jungled mountain, dreaded what he might see if he followed the light.

It was just before dawn...

...and Lt. Jackoson was the only squad member still awake, the others sleeping in luxurious safety for the first time in days. Night noises. Night wind. He was drowsy and rubbed the blur from his eyes. Curiosity prodded him; he rubbed his eyes again. The fire burned sullenly at the side of the grave. The boy was naked, now, and standing...

...running over the ice-crusted ground, Aaron was pushed from behind by the wind. He ignored his leg as long as he could, concentrating on the wavering line of trees ahead. Then, just inside the tiny wood, his foot pushed through a hidden burrow and he slammed to the ground. Palms, knees, forehead stung. When he tried to stand, his leg wrenched out from under him, and he cried out. Before him, trunks and branches, brush and grass twisted slowly in the light of the fire, weaving darkness within darkness. Aaron pushed himself to

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one leg, his teeth clamped to his lips and, using the trees for support, hobbled toward the clearing. His left leg went numb, the pain felt only from the hip, and finally he collapsed.

Not now, he begged, not now!

He crawled, forearms and one foot, seeing his breath puff in front of his face, seeing his hands turn a dry red from the cold. Then there was a break in the pine, and he saw the boy...

...on his father's grave, shuffling slowly from side to side, humming to himself as he stared at the mound beneath his feet. The tribe had reassembled, squatting in the shadows, silent. The pit fire cracked...

...on the rise, and the smell of burning pine pierced the brittle air. And between himself and his son, Aaron saw...

...the prisoner seemingly rooted in place, turned so his face was hidden. The boy, not looking up, not acknowledging the world's existence, muttered something and the man shuddered...

...beneath his heavy, fur-trimmed hunting jacket. There was a rifle, useless now, dangling from one hand. Aaron tried to push himself up, to stand, but the agony was too great, and at the moment all he wanted was the heat from the fire that silhouetted the boy...

...shuffling faster, mumbling in rapid bursts while the prisoner swayed, slipped back, then lurched forward. Slowly, toward the grave, in the light of the fire. Jackson thought he was dreaming...

...but the cold was too real, and he wondered how the boy, so lately his son, could stand the wind that whipped the flames from side to side and drew...

...the prisoner toward them, stiff-jointed like a grotesque marionette. The jungle...

...the clearing was quiet, and Aaron could hear the boy, chanting now, urging, taunting the big man forward. Aaron tried shouting, but his throat was too dry, his mind unable to break loose his tongue. All he could see was the rifle glinting. Sorrentino moved. Lumbered. Silent.

Prisoner/rancher reached the grave.

The boy, still chanting, reached out, palms up, waiting until the other grasped them (the rifle dropping soundlessly). A pair now, circling in slow motion. Dirt shifted beneath their feet. Aaron watched...

...more drowsy still from the fire's heat and the boy's monotonic voice, still undecided whether or not he was dreaming...

...numb from the cold and drawing blood from his lips as he fought the pain enshrouding his thoughts. He lay flat on the ground,

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his head barely raised, his eyes glazed.

The boy abruptly dropped his hands and stepped down from the grave.

The prisoner waited, standing, and made no attempt to resist when the shaman's hand/pony's teeth reached through the earth and took hold.

Jackoson slept, thought he was dreaming.

Aaron fainted, thought he was screaming.

David, smiling, picked up a shovel.

COLLECTORS' ITEMS

F&SF has published six special one-author issues over the years; of these only two remain in print: The Poul Anderson issue (April 1971) and the James Blish issue (April 1972).

The Anderson issue includes: "The Queen of Air and Darkness," a novella by Poul Anderson (winner of Hugo and Nebula awards); a profile of Mr. Anderson by Gordon R. Dickson; an article, "Poul Anderson: The Enduring Explosion," by James Blish; and an Anderson bibliography.

The Blish issue includes: "Midsummer Century," a complete short novel by James Blish; a profile by Robert Lowndes; an article, "The Hand At Issue," by Lester del Rey; and a Blish bibliography.

These issues are available for $1.00 each from: MERCURY PRESS, Inc., P. O. Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

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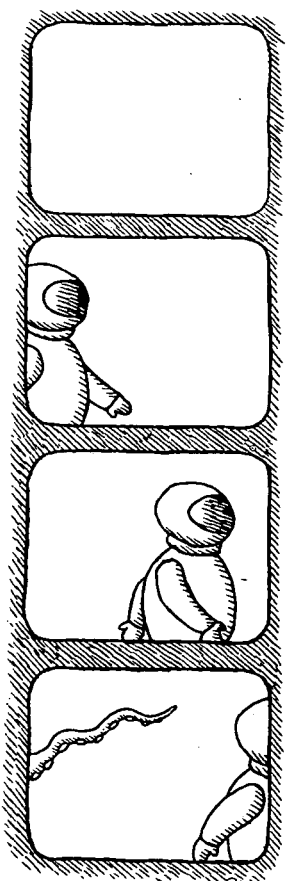
BAIRD SEARLES

Films

DR. FRANKENSTEIN, MR. HYDE, MS. SATAN ET AL

No theatrical releases to cover this month; I may talk about "Charlotte's Web" someday, but I'm not fond of the book and what stills I've seen indicate uninspired artwork. But there's been a passel of new minted productions for TV and some recently discovered oldies. First those made for TV:

The Devil's Daughter (ABC) might have been titled "Whatever Happened to Rosemary's Baby?" (who, despite rumors to the contrary, did not grow up to be President). In contemporary times, a child is fathered by the Devil of a mortal woman who flees with the girl after her birth. When Diane returns from college for her mother's funeral, her father's advocates pass themselves off as old friends and draw her back into their circle because she is destined as the bride of a lesser demon prince. I found it, if not inspired, nicely presented with little of the logic lapses and time-filling of most exercises in neodemonology. There were nice touches, such as two dear little old ladies being introduced as "the Poole sisters" — one is black, the other white, about which no comment whatever is made. The



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film almost collapses when the gathered coven chants "Hail, Diane, Princess of Darkness" to which she responds rather ineffectually, "You've got the wrong person." But it rallies for an ending which I called, but felt clever for so doing.

Frankenstein (ABC) was a two parter, a completely new version rewritten from Ms. Shelley's original. It was almost too literary, making one reaware of the high visual style of the '30s James Whale version. This one was visually pedestrian, but the new and very different adaptation made for interest, and it challenged the classic production in the interpretation of the monster (here called "the giant"). Bo Svenson, with a minimum of makeup (at least it seemed minimal), pulled off a tour de force in the role, playing it more as a defective human being than a defective android, the Karloff/Whale approach.

A Cold Night's Death (ABC) was a low keyed play based primarily on a situation familiar in the supernatural canon but not generally providing the major tension for an entire plot, i.e. character A knows something totally impossible has happened and character B knows that it can't have. When they are two research scientists virtually isolated in a snowbound, mountain-top lab, one being of an exploratory mind and the other determinedly realistic, it can be a minidrama of some power. I enjoyed it.

The Horror at 37,000 Feet (CBS) updates a marvelously Jamesian idea (M.R. James, that is), a Druidic artifact with *powers* affecting the jet liner on which it is being transported across the Atlantic, and mucks it up thoroughly. Avoid.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (NBC). A musical version of the Stevenson sci-fi classic seems like a really daft idea, doesn't it? Well, it was. I think I saw it through mainly because I was too paralyzed by disbelief to turn it off. There is material here for a music drama, but Lionel Bart's songs are of the rum-tiddly-um sort that ruined "Oliver!" I must admit that the production was good, the plot adaptation very clever indeed, and the cast rose above its material, including Kirk Douglas, a most underrated actor, and Susan (Fleur Forsyte) Hampshire. And one moment, leading up to the death of the girl, with Mr. Hyde delivering a song in a cemetery and accompanying himself on a stone

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monument shaped like a piano filled with ivy, was so mad in a Dr. Phibesian way that it almost came off.

*Late, late show dept...*It's always gratifying to discover a movie on TV that you missed in theatrical release that turns out to be good. Two this time...*Moon Zero Two* (1969) turned me off back then with an ad campaign characterizing it as the first "space western." It does indeed take a classic western plot (miners and claim jumpers) and replays it on the Moon, but quite wittily — the bar at Luna station has a chorus line constantly doing the same old routine in new costumes, and the whole place, except the bar, closes up when the miners come to town — and there is an attention to the details of Lunar life that is reminiscent of "2001" or even more aptly, Heinlein. In fact the film is very like a 40s Heinlein story, and you could do worse...*The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) is one of those British period horror films that are never really bad and, in this case, damn good. The period detail (17th century rural England) is remarkable, providing the necessary strong background for the situation, a group of adolescents involved in witchcraft because of the finding of a demonic artifact (M. R. James again). What is unique here is that it is presented as a situation involving a *group* of people; there's no particular hero or heroine, not even much of a plot in the usual sense. I'd want to see it again, but even now I suspect that it could be a minor classic.

Things-to-come dept...."Dune" has been bought for the screen. Whatever will they make of it?

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Ed Wellen's new story is a fresh and amusing twist on the notion of a wild talent out of control: i.e., one Dillard Trayler, who starts out as a sort of walking motion picture projector, then gets into a bit of editing and revising...

Film Buff

by EDWARD WELLEN

In the sixth grade Dillard Trayler stripped the clothes off Miss Starkey. Miss Starkey, chalking another problem on the blackboard at the time, heard gasping and giggling. She turned slowly, giving the kids a chance to blank their faces and bend to their figuring.

But she found the pupils sitting upright, eyes bigging and bugging. She followed the converging gazes to the wall space above the blackboard. The chalk snapped in her hand. There on the wall, as on a movie screen, showed a medium shot of a naked woman.

It took Theodora Starky a moment to know what she was viewing. Then she screamed and threw an eraser at it.

It winked out. But the image had burned into her brain — the image of herself, naked for the whole world to see.

Though it was beyond her how anyone could be working a hidden projector. And how anyone had captured that likeness of her in the first place was even harder to resolve. She had certainly never knowingly fallen into such a suggestive pose. Never. So it had to be either fake or delusion.

Miss Starkey went hot all over at having blown her cool. She had only imagined viewing herself in the altogether. And she knew why. The *au naturel* was only natural; Miss Starkey planned to marry soon, and so of course her mind would be less on teaching and more on...

She tightened her kissable lips and looked at her class. The monsters *had* gasped and giggled about *some*thing. But damned if she'd ask them just what. She had framed it rationally in her own mind and didn't want it unframed.

Her eyes focused on Dillard Trayler because he looked so obviously innocent.

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Dillard tried even harder to look as if what everyone had just seen had nothing to do with him, or as if he too found it dazzling and puzzling. For a long free-frame minute Dillard thought Miss Starkey had turned on him because she divined he was the cause. But it was merely that the usually nice Miss Starkey needed a scapegoat.

"Dillard Trayler. Dillard, look at me when I talk to you." He had a way of not meeting eyes, of looking down or away as if afraid others could read his thoughts. "Stop daydreaming, Dillard, and get on with your math. If you hadn't skipped so many classes, you wouldn't find the work so hard. It wouldn't be work, it would be play."

That was true, he did play hooky a lot. He hoped Miss Starkey wasn't going to put two and two together; he sighed as she turned again to the blackboard and went on chalking with a stub a seemingly harder problem. He had got hooked on films and, as often as he dared, he spent his school time and his lunch money on moviegoing. Even if a film was a hard ticket for a minor, that didn't keep him from viewing it; he had found ways of sneaking into the movie houses.

The truant officer — she had a higher sounding title but was a truant officer all the same — theorized that Dillard had taken to movies as an escape from an unhappy home situation.

But Dillard's home situation wasn't all that unhappy, even though the truant officer tried to stir up trouble between Dillard's parents to make the theory fit.

It was simply that the art of film clicked with the make-up of Dillard's mind. And there was a freakish something else in the make-up of Dillard's mind, a wild talent that enabled him to project his inner visions.

As, in spite of himself, he picked up some knowledge of science in school, he came to understand how this wild talent must work. His brain waves excited the molecules of the wall he stared at and its coating, and the molecules danced to his tune, moved to his measure, shadowed forth his thoughts. He feared to go into it too deeply — if he analyzed it he might lose it. But that did not keep him from exercising it. And his visualizations, blurry to begin with, came into sharp focus as he mastered detail.

Of course the whole town talked about Miss Starkey running around naked in the classroom. But no one — except Dillard Trayler, and he wasn't coming forward with the answer — could be sure what had taken place. Confused accounts of *two* Miss Starkeys, like Goya's clothed and unclothed Duchess of

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Alba, only deepened the mystery and made it seem something of a mass hallucination, and Miss Starkey was quitting anyway to get married and move, and so the talk died down.

After this public undressing of Miss Starkey, Dillard learned not to look at a blank wall while daydreaming. He would stare instead at the blank end papers of a book in his hands or at a shielded sheet of white paper on his desk. But it lacked something when the screen stood at a nontheatrical distance. Too, it was safer to project his fancies onto ready-made images in the dark, where no one could tell the doing was his. So he kept on playing hooky to steal into the movie houses. Or, more truly in keeping with their magic, the movie palaces.

"Your son's studying to be a dropout."

"My son? He's just as much your son."

"I'm beginning to wonder about that. I can't see that coming out of my genes."

"Don't talk dirty."

"That's gee-ee-en-ee-ess."

"It still sounds dirty."

Dillard wanted to lie down and die when he overheard his mother and father go at it like that over him. After he was dead they would be sorry, but it would be too late.

He brightened. All at once he knew how Eddie Bracken had felt in *Hail the Conquering Hero.* Woodrow LaFayette Pershing Truesmith had felt like dying because the Marines had turned him down. That was why the film had opened with a tap dance — "Taps"! — and why six Marines had carried him home.

"What's he up to now? He's too quiet."

No privacy even at home. Why, he found greater privacy on the streets! He smiled. His greatest feat was, on passing an array of sheets on a clothesline, projecting simultaneously four different shots. Though, as the images showed pale in the broad daylight, they passed for a flow of wind-whipped colors; Dillard was the only one to know what he was staring at. And people had to spoil even that.

"What's so interesting about my washing, boy. Ain't you never seen ladies' underwear? Go on, you dirty-minded thing, move along."

The years went by as a dream, as a series of movie dreams.

He still went to the movies almost daily but even so had to draw more and more on himself to make even the real movies satisfying. He took to changing the flow of images on the theatrical screen, giving neorealistic films happy endings, art films a boost of movement, skin flicks a touch of slapstick. But for the strong union,

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more than one projectionist would have lost his job.

Dillard liked playing with montage. He changed the order of shots so that the hero seemed to smile not at an angelically sleeping child but at an old woman slipping and falling. And he tinkered with the action. In *High Noon* Dillard had Gary Cooper hook his thumbs in his gunbelt and find himself unable at the showdown to pry them loose. In *Gilda* Dillard had Rita Hayworth lose her castanets and take a set of false teeth from her mouth to click as she flamenco'd. Afterwards, Dillard always felt ashamed of himself. But while it lasted...

For, while it lasted, he lived in another world, a world in which he was blind to the difference between reality and fantasy — just as in *Symphonie Pastorale* the mirror and the window were the same to Michele Morgan playing the blind orphan girl.

Why did he transform the dreams of others? Why did he impose his own dreams on others? Why not simply dream alone and as unashamedly wildly as he pleased? He needed the stimulus of other people; he wanted to feel he shared his vision with others; in a way he drew power from their presence.

While he felt that power, he knew he held the key to a life beyond life. It made him shiver as when he heard the last two words of *The Man in the White Suit*. Those words not only resolve the story but also tell who Alec Guinness is: "I see." I.C., Iesus Christus. It wasn't the religion that got Dillard but the touch of art; though you might say art — the art of film — was his religion.

Sometimes he had the feeling he ought to stop — if he could still stop. The thing might get out of hand, become a Frankenstein's monster. Was it already too late? Had he set in motion something there was now no stopping? Did the image of Karloff live though no one looked at it? Did the molecules making up the light and shadow of Dillard's visions form a neural network of their own, take on something approaching a life force, and carry on when Dillard turned away or let his attention fade? He thought that might be; often he seemed to sense motion beyond his frame of vision.

It might have been merely the motion of time passing.

Dillard took to haunting the New York Public Library, reading all the books he could find on film technique. He had come to the Big Apple to lose himself in the worm holes and had worked his way up to assistant manager of a sleazy movie palace on 42nd Street and seemed content.

He had given up on real life and

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lived now only for his moments in the dark. His theater's patrons were mainly men sleeping off a drunk or a fix, and his visual tinkering with the cheap films that showed there meant nothing to them.

~~And then he met Iris. They met~~ cute; it would have made a good sight gag. Both arms full of books, she backs into a swinging door to open it...and keeps backing, unaware Dillard has opened it for her. They fell for each other, literally, in a tumble of books.

Iris Cameron. He murmured her name over and over. He seemed to have fallen in love with the name as much as with the girl. But what really set him up was that she appeared immune to his visions.

They were out dining.

"What *are* you looking at?"

He came to with a start and saw he had projected her, nude, on the far wall. Luckily it was a psychedelic joint — night spot, that is — and no one else noticed anything out of the way. Yet he had done it again; this was the end of their affair as it had been the end of it with all the girls he ever dated. But he eyed her uncertainly; she did not seem angry.

"It's a dream sequence."

"Green sequins?"

Could it be she didn't see it? Hoping against hope, he kept the projection going and had her image do a few bumps and grinds.

"Yes. Green sequins."

She looked right at herself and shrugged.

"You must be color-blind. I don't see any."

"I do."

~~Cut to Dillard slipping ring on~~ third finger, left hand of Iris. Cut to over-the-shoulders shot of Dillard and bride reading a mortgage loan form. Cut to tight close-up of dotted line. Just as pen begins signing Dillard's name, cut to matching shot of another dotted line, a course of bricks. Pull back to show brick facing of a small house in a row of small houses.

Dillard carries Iris across threshold. Hold on door. Dillard and Iris walk out with as much dignity as they can muster, followed by a half dozen kids. The kids stand in the doorway and watch as Dillard enters the house next door. Cut to interior, where Iris props up a weak Dillard. He wipes his brow. "Whew!" They smile at each other. Cut to exterior of house. The blind, presumably of the bedroom, winks.

Only after they married did Dillard learn Iris was terribly near-sighted and too vain to wear glasses.

As time went by (Dooley Wilson as Sam in *Casablanca*), they both let themselves go. Not that he didn't try his leftover best to give her what she wanted.

The woman of a lazy stubble-

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bearded gunslinger nags at him to put Dutch doors in her cabin like those she's admired in the town banker's house. At last the gunslinger stirs, snapping strands of cobweb (Mole-Richardson Cobweb Cement, Type 1913). He draws both guns and the woman cringes, fearful she's nagged too much. Out of the frame, the make-up man gets ready to slosh gouts of Hershey's chocolate on her as blood. But the gunslinger cuts loose at the front door of the shack. The slugs perforate the door across the middle. He tells her to hold the top half and give the bottom half a good swift kick. She breaks an ammonia capsule for happy tears as he falls back into his morose stupor. The prop man repairs the cobweb.

After more time went by, it struck Dillard that Iris had stopped nagging at him to better himself and to fix up the place and to be more of a husband. He looked at her and saw that she wore glasses. He realized that she must have been wearing them for some time.

In *Notorious,* when Ingrid Bergman is ill abed and beginning to realize her husband and her mother-in-law are trying to murder her, Hitchcock's lighting gives her face the look of a death's-head. That was Iris as he saw her now.

She was going on about something.

"I'm telling you this for the last time, Dillard."

He stared at her. Telling him what?

She shuttered her eyes.

"I won't see any more of those terrible naked pictures you've been throwing on the walls. You're trying to drive me crazy, that's what. I don't know how you work it and I don't care. But I won't let you make me believe I'm losing my mind."

Dillard smiled dreamily. *Gaslight.* Ingrid Bergman as Paula Alquist, Charles Boyer as Gregory Anton, the man she marries and finds trying to convince her she's going mad.

When he came out of his daydream, he found Iris had taken all his trousers from the closet, stuffed them in a suitcase, and gone, fairly sure he wouldn't follow.

Dillard Trayler grew aware of the ticking clock. He stirred himself. Time to go to work at the movie palace. But thanks to Iris's slapstick exit, time caught him with his pants down and out.

He looked into the dresser mirror, really looked. In Olivier's film *Hamlet* the head of the shadow of Hamlet-Olivier superimposes upon the skull of Yorick; coming events cast their shadows before. *The Quiet American's* quiet for the same reason *The Thin Man's* thin — the one's a corpse, the other's a

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skeleton. How would the story of Dillard Trayler end? Would he just grow old and lonely and flicker out?

A confused image filled his mind. Iris had walked out on Charles Boyer. Dillard had to change that. Charles Boyer was a man who had a way with women. Dillard stared at the blank wall. Pepe le Moko sprang to life in *Algiers*.

Dillard felt new power surge into him, felt it transform his being.

He looked around and down at a stupidly smiling half-naked stranger standing in a small dull room. The stranger and the room lost solidity, became two-dimensional. Erasing his frown, he erased the stranger from his mind. He unmoored his being from the small dull room and fixed it where it belonged, in the world of romance. He looked into the eyes of Gaby-Hedy Lamarr and she looked into his.

"Come with me to the Casbah..."

COMING SOON

Next month, in fact, are two strong novelets: science fiction from Sonya Dorman and fantasy from Avram Davidson. September is almost definitely set as Fred Pohl month, with our special issue including a profile, bibliography and a fine new novella from Fred called "In The Problem Pit." October is anniversary month: stories on hand from Jack Williamson, Lester del Rey, Kate Wilhelm, Barry N. Malzberg, Randall Garrett, Ron Goulart, Andre Norton and many others. We hope to include most of these in the October anniversary issue, but some will surely spill over into later issues. Some exceptionally good reading is on the way this Fall; to be sure of being on hand, send us the coupon on page 160.

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Al Perlman has done logic features for *Intellectual Digest* and figured our readers might be interested in something similar and sf-oriented. We thought so too. If you like the idea of an occasional puzzle feature, let us know.

Invitation To A Cruise

by AL B. PERLMAN

If you happen to be the type that sometimes gets nostalgic for the good old days when everything in the universe wasn't in such an all-fired hurry, and you don't mind roughing it a bit, then maybe I've got something that'll interest you.

I run a freight-hauling service between here and just four other near-by star systems — ZILCHIUM, YOMMULKE, XYCLONE, and WOOWOO — so as you can see, it's just a small, regional operation. Let's face it, there ain't a one of these places that's more than forty or fifty light years away from any other. Of course, there's lots of other short-haul movers listed in the yellow pages, but the thing that makes us different is that we're the only ones I know of who still use old-fashioned rocket ships. It really wasn't too long ago that these old space tubs were common as all get-out, but the invention of the Teleportation Overdrive made them obsolete practically overnight. Nowadays, of course, the galaxy-hopping gadabouts are all gaga over Superteleportation which enables you to arrive at your destination before having started out... and it sort of makes you wonder what'll be next.

Naturally, your average tourist wouldn't be caught dead on anything that could only creep along at about 85 percent the speed of light, which is about the best that these old ships of ours are able to do. I used to get so many inquiries, though, from folks who fancied taking a cruise on an old-fashioned tramp rocket that I finally converted a small cargo compartment on one of the ships so as to provide accommodations for a few thousand passengers. Of course, I never expected the idea would catch on the way it did, and before long we had to set up a special

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passenger division which we call Trans-Astral Tours.

Anyway, leave me tell you about this special economy tour we've cooked up. Not only will it take you to all four of the splendid star systems I mentioned earlier, but you'll get to spend two whole days and nights at one of the better hotels on the most habitable planet in each of them. The planets (not respectively) are VIGORISH, UPPYOORZ, TUMELVELDT and SLUMGULLION... and the hotels (again not respectively) are THE RUBBERNECK, THE QUICKSAND, THE PORNOPARLOR, and THE OPIUMDEN.

And that's not all! Without it costing you one quirgle extra, you'll enjoy a heaping portion of each star system's exclusive culinary specialty. Think how impressed and envious your friends and neighbors will be when you return home and speak knowledgeably of such out-of-this-world delights as NYOCKNYOCKS, MUSCHWA, LUBBALUBBAS, and KOCKLE-KNOCKERS!

Just in case you happen to be wondering which planet orbits which star, and which hotel is where, and what the exclusive culinary specialty of each star system is, here are a few facts that'll help you get it all straightened out in your mind. They'll also tell you the order in which you'll visit these four star systems when you embark on Trans-Astral's big economy tour. It sure would be nice to have you aboard.

1. The first hotel you'll stay at is The Rubberneck, and the last star system on the tour agenda is Woowoo. Don't expect to dine on Muschwa in either of them.
2. Zilchium, the largest of the four stars, has exactly half as many planets as the star orbited by Uppyoorz.
3. Your introduction to Kockle-knockers won't come until after your departure from Tumelveldt.
4. The Opiumden is on one of five planets orbiting the second-smallest star.
5. If there's a delay in the blast-off for Vigorish, you have have time to run back to the hotel for another helping of Lubbalubbas.
6. The Rubberneck is part of a chain of hotels on all three planets circling the smallest of the four stars, whereas only one of the five planets orbiting Xyclone is habitable.
7. By the time you arrive at Tumelveldt, Lubbalubbas and The Opiumden will be only memories.

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8. Muschwa may remind you a little of what you'd had at The Opiumden.

9. You'll find your accommodations on Uppyoorz a good deal more comfortable than they'd been at The Pornoparlor.

SOLUTION

A. You'll arrive on Tumelveldt after having stayed at The Opiumden (Clue 7), and you won't get to sink your teeth into any Kockleknockers until after you've left Tumelveldt (Clue 3). Since you'll be billeted at The Rubberneck on the first stopover (Clue 1), The Opiumden is the hotel at the second stopover, Tumelveldt is the planet you'll visit on the third, and you'll dine on Kockleknockers upon arriving at your fourth stopover which is in the Woowoo system (Clue 1).

B. You'll munch on Muschwa after having been to The Opiumden (Clue 8). Since Muschwa is unknown in the Woowoo system (Clue 1), it can only be featured at the third stopover which is when you'll be on Tumelveldt (Par. A).

C. You'll dine on Lubbalubbas at the stopover immediately preceding your visit to Vigorish (Clue 5). Since Muschwa is served at the third stop (Par. B), Vigorish cannot be the fourth. Tumelveldt is the third stop (Par. A), so Lubbalubbas are not on the menu of the second. You'll get Lubbalubbas, therefore, on your first stopover when you'll be staying at The Rubberneck (Par. A). Vigorish, then, has to be your second planetary stopover, and it's the site of The Opiumden (Par. A).

D. Having ascertained that Lubbalubbas are eaten at the first stop (Par. C), Muschwa at the third (Par. B), and Kockleknockers at the fourth (Par. A), we now know that Nyocknyocks are featured at the second (The Opiumden) on the planet Vigorish.

E. The Rubberneck isn't in the Woowoo system (Clue 1), or the Zilchium system (Clues 2 & 6), or the Xyclone system (Clue 6), so it can only be on the planet orbiting Yommulke.

F. Since the star orbited by Uppyoorz has an even number of planets (Clue 2), Uppyoorz is not the planet on which you'll find The Rubberneck (Clue 6). Having eliminated all other possibilities, The Rubberneck can only be on Slumgullion.

G. Having accounted for the first three planets to be visited, we now know that your final destination before starting back home is Uppyoorz.

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H. The Opiumden isn't in the Zilchium system (Clues 2 & 4), and since we've ascertained that it's not in the Yommulke system or the Woowoo system, we know that our visit to The Opiumden on the planet Vigorish will take place while we're in the Xyclone system.

I. All other possibilities having been eliminated, our third stop can only be in the Zilchium system.

J. You'll stay at The Pornoparlor before moving on to Uppyoorz (Clue 9). Since Uppyoorz is the fourth stopover (Par. G), and the hotels for stopovers 1 and 2 are The Rubberneck and The Opiumden, The Pornoparlor is where you'll stay when you visit planet No. 3. The hotel on stopover No. 4, therefore, can only be The Quicksand.

RECAP:

VISIT NO.	STAR	PLANET	HOTEL	FOOD
#1	YOMMULKE	SLUMGULLION	THE RUBBERNECK	LUBBALUBBAS
#2	XYCLONE	VIGORISH	THE OPIUMDEN	NYOCKNYOCKS
#3	ZILCHIUM	TUMELVELDT	THE PORNOPARLOR	MUSCHWA
#4	WOOWOO	UPPYOORZ	THE QUICKSAND	KOCKLEKNOCKERS

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Gregg Williams is a student at Memphis State University, where he is enrolled in the professional drama program, despite a love affair with computers, mathematics and hobbyist electronics. His first story for F&SF is the amusing tale of what happens when the venerable *I Ching* is introduced at The Tuesday Night Forum of Tactical Army Base Research Outpost No. Two, commonly known as TABROT.

The Computer and The Oriental

by GREGG WILLIAMS

Of course, there aren't many privileged enough to know about the Tuesday Night Forum, although I'd bet a lot of people — both Ours and Theirs — would raise perdition if they did know. It's just that we scientists are a close-knit bunch and don't want our own times infringed upon. The Tuesday Night Forum — behind the Hat and Barrel Pub, up the back stairs, first door on the left (sorry, membership by invitation only) — is the home away from home for the collected scientific task force laughingly known in Army officalese as Tactical Army Base Research Outpost No. Two, commonly known as TABROT. It wouldn't do to say exactly what the function of the post is, but let it suffice to say that TABROT houses the nation's most brilliant misfits the Army could get a hold on.

There are about 35 or 40 of us working whatever hours please us — another reason why the Tuesday Night Forum is a continuous thing — but there are a couple of us generally regarded as ringleaders. There's Colonel Johnny T. Bartlett, here on special assignment to TABROT after he programmed a computer (affectionately known as Patton II) to insubordinate a general during a simulation war game, and Gus Fletcher, a Ph.D. in chemistry who left Boston U. because he "couldn't see trying to educate a bunch of conceited monkeys." We've also got the world's trickiest psychiatrist, Dr. Walter "Socrates" Carnegie, and finally, myself, Dan Green, general junkbox technician, liaison man between Us and the rest of the world, and self-appointed court jester of TABROT.

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Our first adventure as a group was a rather elaborate joke that brought Dr. Carnegie into the fold of the Tuesday Night Forum and bestowed upon him his cherished nickname, "Socrates."

It was late one night when Socrates, then only a few weeks at TABROT, came into the Forum with a pillow and pajamas in hand and headed for the back room. Gus was sitting beside me; we turned and looked at each other; then Gus said, "He may be the doctor, but I know when a man needs *some* medications." I nodded knowingly and pressed a button.

"Hey, Walt," I hailed, "come on over and sit awhile. I've got a pitcher of the local poison on the way up."

Gus took the cigar from between his teeth. "Still think shrinks are the salvation of the world?"

"We're the only sane ones left," he muttered.

"What's wrong, Walt?"

"Martha kicked me out. I guess she thinks I'll come back if I have to sleep out for a week or so."

At this point, Finney came bounding up the back stairs with a round of beers. I asked him, "Anybody asked for us, Finney?"

"Nobody out of the ordinary. A couple o' wives, various departments, the police, and a couple of calls from NASA."

"Well," said I, "we'd sort of like our privacy tonight if you can, Finney. You see, we've got kind of a family problem on our hands."

Finney viewed Socrates with that concerned but respectful look only a pubkeeper can give. "Oi quite understand."

"And, Finney? Call me if NASA rings, say, three more times. It may be important."

I turned to Socrates, who looked like he'd be about ready to cry in his beer if he weren't a psychiatrist. "Why'd she lock you out, Walt?" I ventured.

"Blast if I know," he explained angrily. "Said I should have been there when some man called for me at home. When I asked her if she gave the man my number, she ran into the bedroom and told me if I wanted to sleep tonight I had better take a pillow with me."

"Didn't you try to talk to her?" I asked.

"What's the use? When she gets like this, I just know I can't talk to her."

I nudged him in the ribs. "Come on, man, tell us. We know you know what's wrong."

He didn't respond. "Do I?" he asked blankly.

I gave Gus a stare that asked, "Should we try anything?" The gleam in his eye, though slightly veiled, answered, "What have we got to lose?"

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I pursed my lips as if in serious thought, then looked straight at Socrates and asked point-blank, "Have you...us...considered another system?"

His eyes darted over to Gus, then back to me. "What d'you mean?"

"I mean another way of...you know...explaining things."

"You mean religion?"

"No, I mean another way of looking at things."

"Like what?" he asked.

"How much do you know about Oriental philosophy?" I put to him.

"Not much. Psychologists have never taken Oriental thinking seriously."

"Precisely!"

"How many Chinese families do you know with marital problems?" Gus interjected.

"Exactly!" I added. "So how can you say it won't work? Why, man, the population figures of China speak for themselves!"

"What'd you have in mind?"

Both Gus and Socrates were looking intently at me; I couldn't afford to slip right then. "Have you ever heard of the *I Ching?*" (I pronounced the first word with a long *e*) "It's a Chinese method of divination — now wait a minute, Walt, hear me out. It's not as bad as it sounds. The Chinese regard it as a venerable ancestor who answers questions. It advises you how the Superior Man would handle the situation. Confucius used it all his life; even some philosophers regard it highly as a tool for interpreting the subconscious. How about asking it what you should do for Martha?"

"Come on, guys. This is serious."

"And so am I. What have you got to lose?"

"Well, all right. But don't let anybody know I did this."

"Sure, Walt. Gus, grab pencil and paper and three coins while I go get the book."

When I came back, Gus was fooling around with the paper, filling it with benzene rings and other notations I dared not guess the purpose of.

"All right," I said to Gus and Socrates, "you'll have to remember that the *I Ching* is based on the idea of eternal change, and the answer it gives now depends only on the state of the universe right now, which will never be the same again. So the answer can be very different if you ask it later."

"Very convenient," Socrates muttered.

"Be quiet. As I was saying, the *I Ching* is made of 64 hexagrams, or collections of six horizontal broken or unbroken lines arranged one on top of the other. When you throw the three coins, how they land determines whether the line is

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unbroken or broken. After you throw six times, you have a hexagram, which you then look up in the *I* for your answer. Are you ready?"

"I guess so," he said, half embarrassed at the prospect.

"What're you going to ask?" Gus asked.

"I'm going to ask...it... how I should...."

"Should what, Walt?" I asked.

"Should make up with Martha, I guess."

"Good man, good man! Right to the heart of the problem!"

I motioned in the direction of the coins, and Socrates picked them up. "Throw them," I said. Two tails and a head — an unbroken simple line. I drew a straight horizontal line on the paper.

"Again," I said. This time he got the same thing; I drew another line above the first.

"Keep on going." He got two heads and a tail. Above the two lines I put a line with a gap in the middle.

The fourth line was unbroken, and by then Socrates was tossing the coins with a certain concentration not unusual when you start feeling the pull of the *I*. The fifth toss was three tails, which indicated a changing broken line — that is to say, when the hexagram is completed, you can change all the changing lines to their counterparts and get another hexagram that gives you more data.

The sixth line, the one on top, came out an unbroken line.

By this time, Socrates was rather impatient to see the interpretation. Although he still maintained he didn't really believe it, he became very silent when I gave him the hexagram to read. It was *K'uei,* Mutual Alienation.

When Socrates finally looked up, he said, "Come on, Dan, you don't expect to tell me — well, look! These things are so vague..."

It was plain to me that we'd hit pay dirt somehow, and so I took a chance to guarantee he'd buy what he'd already seen. Choking down a chuckle of accomplishment, I looked at Socrates for a few seconds and said heavily, "Go ahead. Read the next one."

Socrates thumbed through the book and read aloud, "*Lu,* Treading carefully. The diviner of *Lu* treads as if on the tail of a tiger" — here Socrates glanced up at me — "which, however, will not bite the Superior Man. There will be great progress and success."

Socrates looked like he had seen the Holy Savior — I crossed myself mentally — walking on water. The results of his introduction to the *I* scared even me. I clasped him on the shoulder and said, "Well, Walt, I guess you have your answer."

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I wonder if Socrates knew about Confucius was my only thought.

Sure enough, Socrates went home that night, and the next time we saw him was late the next morning. To me, this only proved the *I Ching* was a good sounding board for your own subconscious.

A few days later, Colonel John had joined Gus and me for lunch, and Colonel John asked me what Socrates that night. I told him what had happened and explained how any hexagram would have had a similar, although I admitted, not as pronounced an effect. And he replied, "Well, boys, the reason I asked was because I was wondering whether it had anything to do with the way Socrates has been acting."

"What do you mean, Colonel John?" I asked.

"It seems, gentlemen," he drawled in his native Texas tongue, "That on several occasions, I have definitely heard the sound of coins being thrown behind the good doctor's door."

Gus whistled softly.

"I see," I said. "I haven't noticed anything unusual with the doctor. Anything else?"

"He's made some rather vague requests for computer time. And that, gentlemen, is about as fishy as the enemy asking to borrow white flags."

"If he wants to play around with it, that's fine with me. No benzene out of my pipette, as they say back home." Gus flicked a piece of cigar ash onto my plate.

I sat there, staring at the ash. "But he's the staff psychologist," Colonel John said.

"And nuttier than the rest of us," I added. "I think we have a problem on our hands."

We sat in thought for a minute.

Then I said slowly, "And I also think we have a solution. Colonel John, do you think you can work a piece of active hardware and interface it with a minicomputer?"

"What do you have in mind?" he grinned.

I briefly outlined my plan and sat in self-contained righteousness as Gus and Colonel John looked at me in utter disbelief.

Finally, we all burst out in uncontrollable laughter. Between gasps, Gus managed to say, "Dan, you wouldn't!"

"Why not?" I asked sternly. "It's for his own good!" At that, we all lapsed uncontrollably into laughter.

Looking back, it was a good thing we plugged the whole mess into a big computer instead of a little one. Of course, the credit goes to Colonel John for the programming that I maintained saved our necks, but he still maintains the credit should somehow mystically

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go to some Higher Power above, who is probably a Computer anyways.

I burst into Socrates' office one morning without knocking and shouted as earnestly as possible, "Doctor, come quick! Gus has cracked up, or something!"

He looked up from a dusty book and scrambled out of his chair. "What is it?"

"Gus — he...he's been working too long! Something...he's babbling and...come help, Walt! Doc Pritcher doesn't know what's wrong!"

I exited without further comment out the front door and down the corridor towards the lab. I stopped halfway down the hall and urged Socrates on with a show of frenzy. "Hurry! He could be doing...heavens knows what by now!"

Gus was putting on quite an act. All of it wasn't an act — the heavy breathing, bulging eyes and sweating were caused by a small dose of Duralin we had liberated from the storeroom with Doc's permission.

"Babble abble table in cogno skeen ream ahhhhh!!" The babbling was Gus alone, and he was doing a frightening job of it. He was gasping and mumbling to himself between nonsense. "Ring ring... us... thingawhich marble in...told me not lot string along....." His voice faded to a murmer.

"Walt, you're the only one who can help him now! Please go help him now!" I pushed him into the crowd, right beside Gus, who was softly moaning to himself now. I started walking briskly out of the room, stepping over broken glassware as I went. "I'll go find a bed to put him on!" I shouted.

I hurried back to Socrates' office, where Colonel John was splicing a fine wire into a bare electrical circuit inside Walt's disassembled telephone. "There's your interface, Dan. Straight to the computer through the telephone line."

I took a small package from Colonel John's briefcase and applied a walnut-colored lacquer over the wire where it went across the thickness of the desk, right in front of where Socrates would be sitting. Then, from a small cardboard box, I took nine ersatz pennies and replaced each of the pennies in Socrates' desk drawer as carefully as possible; psychiatrists can be very observant about things other than people, too.

Colonel John was hiding a telemetering device behind a file cabinet, attaching a glass-eye vidicon in the light fixture where it had a good view of the desk.

Finally, I took a paper-thin brown plastic laminate and taped it to his desk, replacing it with Socrates' massive blotter. Colonel

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John made the connections to the reassembled telephone, and I camouflaged them.

"Is that it?" I asked.

"Should be. Mission accomplished."

I snapped my fingers. "The bed—"

"— is in Room 109B, two corridors down, turn left, fourth door on the right." And with that he was gone. I couldn't be sure, but I could have sworn he saluted me.

I ran back to the lab. The crowd was gone by now, and Socrates had Gus on the floor with a pillow of sorts under his head. He turned when he saw me and said, "The doctor told me he couldn't figure it out. He said that there was nothing that fit these symptoms and that there wasn't anything organically wrong with Gus in the first place. All I can do is take care of him myself and see if I can bring him out of it. Doc warned me not to give him any medicines," (Doc Pritcher was into this, too) "but he said a mild sedative would be all right."

I looked at Gus. Yelling and screaming like that must have been awfully tiresome. He looked rather peaceful, and I'm sure the drug wasn't totally the cause of it.

Socrates was saying, "...and all I know to do is bring him to my office and see if I can coax some sense into him."

"Look," I said, seeing some potential in this situation, "go get Colonel John and tell him we need him to help carry Gus. You might mention to him the miniature earplugs I told him about. If he'd bring them when he comes, it'd save a lot of time."

"All right, I'll be back as soon as possible. Stay with him, would you?"

"Of course." I walked over to Gus and held his head in my arms. "Hey, fellow, are you all right?"

"Lemme have one more cigar before I die," he moaned.

"Snap out of it, Gus, we just got a great chance to test out the entire system. Socrates wants to talk to you in his office. Just play along like you're coming back to your senses, and we'll tell you what to do. Socrates will be coming back with a miniature receiver we can stick in your ear."

"Look, Dave, I'm...I'm out of it. Mild sedative, nothing. Lemme rest."

"Okay, pal. I...guess it just knocked you out. Take it easy and we'll play it by ear."

Colonel John came back with a box of "miniature earplugs," which I put in my pocket casually, like I was going to use them later. Between the two of us, we helped Gus to the office of Dr. Walter S. Carnegie; the way he was leaning on my shoulder, he really must have been weak.

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Before we set Gus down in Socrates' leather easy chair, we gave him a small capsule with a hole in one end, which he knew to put closest to his ear. We made our apologies to Socrates and hastily left the room.

From there, we sprinted two corridors over and four doors down to my office, almost colliding with a folding bed lodged neatly inside the door. Colonel John asked me, "What's the doc's number?"

"1565," I answered.

He dialed the number and pressed a small box to the mouthpiece before it could ring. Placing the receiver into a cradle connected by a thick umbilical cord to the computer terminal in my office, he typed into the terminal:

//SYS IN
RUN CHING ANAL
OPTIONS MINUS

At this, the computer responded:

CHING ANAL READY
OPTIONS LEFT ONLINE

Colonel John turned to me and said, "The computer's ready, Dave."

"Good, Colonel John," I was fiddling with a receiver hooked up to a decoding circuit and a television monitor. On the desk in front of me I had a copy of the *I Ching* and a wireless microphone. The image was coarse but serviceable. I managed to glimpse the computer's reply. "How've you got the computer working now, Colonel John?"

"Online means we can type in one or two numbers, and the computer will relay which way for the coins to fall automatically. I'm working on some decision-making subprograms, but I haven't got them debugged."

"Let's check everything out." I turned to the microphone and set the television where both Colonel John and I could see it. "Gus, can you hear me? Shift your head to the left for yes, right for no."

Gus glanced over at the painting to his left.

"Look up, casually, now. Can you see a glass bead in the grating overhead? About the second tier of lights."

Socrates' voice came on over the TV speaker. "Gus? Gus, are you feeling any better?"

"Take it slow, Gus. Don't recover too fast."

"Sort of. Cobwebs...all over. What happened?"

"You went berserk. But you're all right now."

"I really feel bad..." He slipped off into mumbling and fell silent.

"Gus, that's a good act, but I want you so you can...Gus?"

"I don't think it was an act," Colonel John suggested.

"Well, then, there's nothing left to do but wait."

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We didn't have to wait long. Socrates scribbled on a notepad for a while and finally reached in his drawer for some coins.

"Type in 50 and 12." These were the hexagrams for "The Cauldron" and "Stagnation."

I watched in astonishment as a silent machine read our commands, interpreted them, and sent invisible messages to some very phony coins, causing them to jump like trained Mexican jumping beans, while we watched and controlled almost all the action in a closed room hundreds of yards away. With a value of three given to each head and two to each tail, the sequence should have been 7,9,9,8,6,8. And so it came out, from the first throw (two heads and a tail) to the last (two tails and a head). It was all so perfect, you couldn't even tell the coins were bouncing funny unless you knew what to look for.

"Doc is going to want to ask some more questions. See if you can't raise Gus, Colonel John."

After several tries he turned to me and said, "He's sound asleep."

"Well, then, I guess I'll have to give him what he needs to know. If it looks like he's going to throw again, type in 46 and 58."

I knocked lightly on the door and stuck my hand in timidly. "I thought I'd check in to see how Gus was doing, if I may."

"Come on in, Dave." Socrates whispered. "Sit down. He's doing fairly well, considering. He's awfully tired, but he was coherent for a few minutes. May I ask a question? You and Gus seem to be good friends."

"Of course, Doctor. Anything to help." I could almost hear Colonel John laughing from here to the control room over that line.

"Has Gus been under any... strain lately? Any problems that might upset him?"

"Yes, he has. The office gave him a very hard problem to do, very hard, indeed, and he could have solved it easily, but..."

"But what?"

"What I say is confidential, isn't it?"

"Why, yes. Of course it is."

"I don't know whether I should say this," I said slowly, stalling for time. "This is rather private, and Gus might not want me to say..."

"But if it has a bearing on the case..."

My mind was coming up with something, but I didn't know whether to abandon the old plan in favor of winging it like this. "It has a definite bearing on the case, but —" Whatever it was, it was something really...really devious.

"Under the circumstances, Dave, and considering that I *am* a psychiatrist..."

"I guess so." It was now or never....and I finally had it! "You

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see," I said with some difficulty in restraining myself, "Gus is a kleptomaniac. And he's in a bit of trouble because of it. Undue work and all this work, that really must have done it. I think you can understand."

"Oh, quite. But this is quite shocking. Not in itself, of course, but I never really noticed..."

"He's quite good," I added.

"Still, I never saw any signs —"

"If you don't want to believe me..." I made motions to go.

"No, no, not at all. Still, would you give me some time to consider..."

"Of course. Please take care of him. He's a brilliant man and a good friend. Good-by." As soon as I got out of his office, I sprinted for our control room, numbers ajumble in my head.

Breathlessly, I came in the door and gasped, "28 and...and 45, I think!" I hoped it made sense. Colonel John typed them in just as the first coins were in the air.

"What are they?" he asked.

"'Excess' and 'Gathering Together,' I think."

"I've got Gus on the line again. He's still pretty tired, but he moved his head when I told him to."

"All right. Gus, just lay still and I'll tell you what happened while you were out. I was going to feed the good doctor the info we agreed on when you conked out on us, but I got a flash of inspiration, and I've convinced him, as soon as he reads those hexagrams, that you're a kleptomaniac. Lie still, blast it! Now, building on this, here's the new plan...."

About an hour later, Gus had left Socrates' office, leaving behind the impression of "thank you very much, but I don't need any help" but taking with him an ashtray and several pencils. He *was* quite good.

Several days passed, and we occasionally fed Socrates situations until he started looking like the man with an inside track on tomorrow's daily double. When he was confronted with a decision-making situation — even ones we didn't make up — he went immediately for a tete-a-tete with "venerable Chinese ancestor." He was ready for the kill.

The morning of the gambit, we fed Socrates a single hexagram, one that didn't fit in with his question; it was "Arresting Movement."

Then, about eleven o'clock, Socrates' office broke into a three-ring circus. Without warning, the door burst open, and Gus was carried into the room, struggling and screaming, by two friends of mine in MP uniforms.

"You decadent capitalist pigs," he shouted, "I don't care what you do to me! Nothing you can do will make me tell you where they are! Nothing, do you hear me, nothing!"

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He tried to jump out of his chair and was held there, kicking, by the two bogus MP's. Gus lunged for Socrates, but was held firmly in place by his captors. "And you! I don't care what you do to me! I've heard what you madmen do to prisoners, but you won't get it out of me! But it won't matter by tomorrow morning! Every one of you in every defense base in the hemisphere will be dead and our glorious Red troops will march over this crumbling society! I'll be dead," he concluded, out of breath, "but at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing I took you all with me!"

Socrates was white with fear. "This man's mad!" he exclaimed.

"No, Doctor," I said, stepping forward without tripping over the sash on my white trench coat, "I wish it were that simple. But as it happens, this man is indeed what he claims to be." I took the cigarette from my lips and, shifting the snap-brim hat higher on my forehead, gave myself a quick rundown in the mirror facing me. *Not bad,* I thought to myself. *Bogart had nothing on me.*

I walked up to Socrates and looked him straight in the eye. "This lousy Commie has somehow slipped a very important document out of the security room." I turned toward Gus, who sneered back at me. "If it gets out of this building" — I turned back toward Socrates and pointed with my cigarette — "you'd better kiss your girl friend good-by. Tonight.

"It's up to you, Carnegie. If you can't get it out of that weasel where those papers are before the courier arrives....it's curtains for all of us!" I expected the music to flair up any second now. But it didn't and Socrates looked scared. "Look, Doc, we'd sweat it out of him if we had the time, but we don't. So if you've got anything in mind, use it and fast!"

Socrates looked nervously from me to the MP's to Gus and then back to me. "There's no way to get him to talk?"

"Not for my life!" he spat out.

"Gentlemen," Socrates said stiffly, "I don't know whether you will believe me when I tell you this, but I've found an old method of Oriental psychology that will force this...this traitor to confess despite himself." We all leaned closer at this piece of news. "But, in any case, we don't have anything to lose, do we? Would you have these men place Gu — Fletcher in my chair here?"

I nodded, and the two guards manhandled Gus into the doctor's seat.

"Now, Mr. Fletcher, will you tell us where you hid the documents?"

"Never!"

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"I think you will. Throw these coins." Gus threw them, reluctantly.

"Again."

"What is this?" Gus demanded.

"Just keep doing it."

From the coin tosses, Socrates constructed a hexagram and found its interpretation in the *I Ching*. Then he solemnly announced, "Gentlemen, I think I know where the documents are to be found. But first, is there any place that this man frequented this morning?"

"That would be the latrine, I think."

At this, all of us save Gus and the two guards jumped for the door. It must have been a sight, half a dozen men running briskly in the direction of the men's bathroom. When we got there, Socrates looked around and commanded one of the men to break open the towel dispenser. He did, and sure enough, there was a buff envelope taped to the side.

"You've done your country a great service, Dr. Carnegie. It won't be forgotten." I handed him the sealed envelope. "I believe this is yours."

Socrates took the envelope reluctantly, opened it when he saw the markings, "TOP SECRET DR. WALTER CARNEGIE FOR YOUR EYES ONLY." Inside, the letter read,

Dr. Carnegie,

If you can stand to be the butt of a rather elaborate joke, you're the kind of person we like around here. You've been had, and good! Colonel John, Gus, and I would like to welcome you into a little private club of ours, lightly called the Tuesday Night Forum. If you accept, play us out to the last by throwing what I hope to be your last *I Ching*.

Yours truly,
David Green

As Socrates walked silently back to his office, I already knew what the answer would be. It would be *Ming I*, Intelligence Wounded.

Several nights later in the Inner Sanctum of the Tuesday Night Forum, while we were relating the details of the affair to our new friend (who had already accepted his name of Socrates), he asked us, "How did you know I'd pick the right interpretation of the hexagram?"

"It's all very simple," I said.

"Dave, I've been meaning to tell you —" Colonel John interrupted.

"Later, Dave. You see, Socrates, I thought the hexagram 'Returning' would be sufficiently vague for me to steer you —"

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"But that's what I wanted to tell you, Dave. When I was in your office, just before Gus threw the coins, I knocked the receiver out of the cradle. By the time I redialed the number, it was too late. I jammed the computer into automatic and let it work on the last three lines by itself."

"You mean —?" I asked incredulously.

"I think that was a fine job of computer jockeying you did for it to do all that," Gus commented.

"I don't think that was it," Colonel John replied. He glanced toward the ceiling. "After all, I've always maintained that He is a Computer anyway."

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Here is the second of Mr. Coney's Tales of Finistelle (the first was "The Manya," March 1973) concerning the colorful adventures of Donald "God" Lackland, coping as well as possible with a one-way trip to a far-future land.

The Bridge on The Scraw

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

The rain forest of Gota extends on either side of the River Scraw from Poli in the northeast to Kraa on the delta. Near Kraa, which is the capital of the canton, the tall wet jungle degenerates into mangrove where the brown waters merge with the warm sea.

It was the time of the high tides, and the tribute barge was moored several miles upstream from the capital, having sent out smaller rafts to collect taxes from the outlying forest villages.

"It is like a hive," said Yubu, the bandit leader, as he and his men crouched among the overhanging branches at the water's edge. "The rafts go out like bees to gather pollen from the villages and bring it back to the hive ship. And," here he chuckled, his emerald face creased with delighted anticipation, "we will collect the honey."

"Atta, atta!" agreed his followers enthusiastically. They appreciated Yubu's turn of phrase. Such poets, they felt, were rare; and Yubu, demonstrably a practical man too, was unique.

Later the smaller rafts began to drift back to the mother ship. The bandits watched with interest.

Wassa, a scarred veteran of many village raids, spoke. "I have an idea, my chief. After we have taken what we need, let us fire the

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tribute barge before casting it adrift. Then there will be much confusion and wailing in Kraa when it arrives on the current, and many houses will burn. Including, if God smiles upon us," he added piously, "the quarters of the state warriors. Thus will pursuit be delayed."

"Atta, atta!" cried the bandits.

"A worthy plan," agreed Yubu, casting a sidelong glance at Wassa, who was too clever by half. The most immediate danger to a bandit chief is his own lieutenant, and Yubu's long-lived leadership was due to appreciation of this fact.

The gloom under the trees intensified as the evening flight of dunnet birds flocked overhead with a muted clattering of wings, and the mist drifted up from the dark water.

"We go," said Yubu. The raft slid from cover.

They tied up under the high stern of the tribute barge and slipped aboard. The ensuing battle was short and conclusive; indeed, it could hardly be termed a battle at all, as the defenders were asleep. They were dispatched swiftly and quietly, and the string of smaller collection rafts were cut adrift to disappear into the gloom.

The only casualty was Wassa, who inexplicably lost his balance while boarding the barge and was instantly consumed by fangsnappers.

"Take only the small valuables," instructed Yubu, and the bandits' raft was loaded high with dried meat, copper ingots, and finely wrought jewelry from the village of Diko, renowned for the industry of its women. Then the barge was fired and set adrift.

As dawn shaded the black water pearl, the bandits' raft reached a group of *dweldas* on a narrow tributary deep in the forest.

The plunder was carried into a large storehouse which already contained the profit from previous raids. Last night's piracy was a mere sideline to the bandits' normal business of rapine and looting among the forest villages.

"Let us examine the jewelry," said Yubu eagerly. "There will be an equal division of items, although I, being leader, will supervise." In the dim interior of the *dwelda* he began to open the small hardwood boxes. His men crowded round, straining to follow the deft, rapid movements of their chief's fingers as he sorted the glittering objects into piles. He flung open another box....

"Aaargh!" exclaimed Yubu, beating at his wrist. The light was poor, and before the others had time to recognize the incredibly swift, bounding worms, they had

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each become the host to a deadly parasite.

The lobo worm has a high metabolism and is a voracious eater of live or dead flesh, disappearing beneath the skin in a matter of seconds. Well-fed, it can reproduce itself every half hour, although this fact is of scant interest to the victim, since the lobo worm can cover the distance from the extremities to the heart in two minutes flat.

The women of Diko resented tax gatherers. If they had known of the misdirection of their parcel, however, it is unlikely that they would have expressed undue grief. There were more than a few bastard children of Yubu's rapists squealing in the Diko *dweldas.*

Donald Lackland had arrived in the village of Poli via the time machine operated by Travel-On, Inc., on a one-way basis. In his self-appointed role as peacemaker, God, juju and sage to the village where he had made his new home, he was now addressing certain abashed warriors.

"Men of Breda," he said sternly, "you came with warlike intentions to conquer this village of Poli, and you failed. You are now prisoners and in our power. Can you give me any good reason why you should not die?"

One of the small green men spoke. "God Lackland, before whom even *kraxa* the terrible forest wolf kneels, have mercy on us. We are men of surprising virility and in our villages countless children await our return."

"Wrong has been done, chief, and it was yourself who led these men into bad ways," accused Lackland. "I feel you should carry the blame."

"Atta, atta!" murmured the rest of the Bredan warriors, sensing a reprieve.

"Mercy!" cried the chief, trembling. "My only error was to be defeated, which can happen to anyone."

In the center of the circle of *dwelda* huts, a globba balloon was being prepared. Prungle net was slung over the huge, hydrogen-filled plant and secured around the base. A group of Poli men held the balloon down.

The Poli chief, Dongo, drew Lackland aside. "All is ready," he said gleefully. A brazier crackled at his side. "And the signs are good, for it is not raining."

Lackland spoke quietly. "I wish to frighten this man, chief Dongo."

"And frightened he will be," enthused the other, "when he clings to a burning balloon in the sky."

"I mean I'm going to kill him, Dongo," said Lackland severely. "Such is not the way, *sitwana.* I will merely frighten him to the point

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that he will never make war again."

The Poli chief's face fell. "That is not possible, your Godship," he said respectfully. "The memory of a Bredan is short. He will be back with more spears within a season."

Lackland sighed, sensing a grain of truth. "Tie a rope to the base of the globba," he said. "We will allow him to ascend *so* high, then bring him back before he burns. He may learn from the lesson."

"It shall be done," said Dongo resignedly.

Lackland returned to the prisoner. "Climb!" he commanded.

The Bredan chief eyed the spears around him, then, hesitantly, scrambled up the prungle net and sat on top of the vast balloon, shivering.

"Apply the flames!" shouted Dongo, now in charge of operations. A blazing stick was touched to the folds of the net at the base of the balloon. Smoke rose and the mesh began slowly to burn.

"Lift off!" yelled Dongo.

The anchor team stepped back, letting go, and the globba began to rise, trailing the rope, smoking heavily at the base. The chief screamed, clinging to his insecure perch at the summit.

Lackland watched grimly. They had a few moments to spare before the spreading flames became sufficiently intense to explode the balloon; the globba skin, though light, is thick.

Suddenly he leaped forward. "Catch the rope!" he cried, jumping at the free end as it swung into the air. He missed. The balloon wobbled irretrievably higher.

He groped in his clothing, snatched out his laser pistol, and directed a narrow beam at the flank of the balloon, slicing away a large section of skin.

The globba, deflating rapidly, fell back towards the village.

"Let go!" shouted Lackland as the balloon began to spin lazily, off balance, and the Bredan chief came into view hanging by his hands. The chief, now some fifteen feet from the ground, released his grip and fell heavily, rolling at Lackland's feet. The balloon, suddenly lighter, began to rise again; then, as the flames surged around the rent in the side, it exploded into a crimson globe of fire and drifted away over the trees.

The chief of the Bredans vomited noisily.

Lackland turned to Dongo. "I thought I told you to hold the balloon down," he snapped.

The chief shuffled his feet. "Indeed you told me to tie on a rope, God Lackland," he said contritely. "But I regret it slipped my mind to instruct my men to hold the end. Such mistakes will happen."

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"After which lesson," Lackland addressed the Bredans, "I suggest we come to terms. What is your name, chief?"

"Hota."

"And this is chief Dongo of Poli." Lackland placed his hands on the shoulders of the miniature green humanoids. "I wish you two to become friends. Or at least," he amended, "allies."

"Why?" they asked in unison.

Lackland explained at length the advantages of mutual trading, exchanges of ideas, united fronts against adversity, et cetera, while the two men regarded him in mild skepticism, and each other in unconcealed dislike.

When he had finished, Dongo said slowly, "All this sounds good, God Lackland. You must understand that such ideas are new to me, and strange. It seems you say that Poli will rule over Breda, do you not?"

"I am saying you are of equal standing," replied Lackland wearily.

"No men are of equal standing. *Sitwana.* One must prove himself the stronger."

"I will not allow any such proof," snarled Lackland. "Now listen to me, you two. You will work together. There will be no fighting between the two villages. If I hear of so much as a border incident, I will burn you both with my *manya,* the dreadful *kraxa-kraxa.*" He waved the laser pistol under their noses.

"Ah." A light of comprehension dawned on their emerald faces. They understood.

"I will return with my men to Breda," said Hota, edging away, "and I shall always think well of Poli. There are evil men in the forest," he added anxiously, "who attack by night. Rest assured that if they say, under persuasion, that they come from Breda, then they lie."

"Not so fast, Hota." Lackland's huge hand grasped the chief's shoulder. "There is a further consideration. In order to facilitate trade and communication between our two villages, I shall require a road to be built through the forest."

"By the men of Poli?"

"By the men of Breda. Call it reparations for your cowardly attack on this village. It shall be completed one month from now."

Hota thought he saw a way out. "But the River Scraw lies between Breda and Poli, God Lackland."

"Then bridge it, chief."

"Unk," said Hota, leading his crestfallen warriors away.

The building of the Scraw bridge became a legend in its time. Lackland supervised, laser in hand, and the men and women of Breda

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worked with unaccustomed energy, felling trees, dragging logs, placing them according to Lackland's directions while the claws of the fangsnappers clicked in expectation.

Lackland had decided on a suspended structure, erecting pillars on either bank and stretching ropes between, planks to be laid across these ropes. A prungle net was slung underneath to reduce the mortality rate during construction. The chief of Poli arrived to view the proceedings.

He watched with satisfaction as the Bredan fighting force was reduced by one, and the water churned scarlet beneath a broken section of net. "It is difficult to obtain strong netting these days," he said, "the season being wrong."

The net had been supplied by Poli. "Stop work!" called Lackland, and the Bredans climbed thankfully from the trembling structure. "Chief Dongo," said Lackland quietly. "Send your men into the forest for fresh netting. The men of Breda have lost confidence and are not working well. When the new net is in position, you will personally restore this confidence by walking across the net from one bank to the other."

"Unk," said Dongo, and instructed his men earnestly and with many graphic gestures of his spear. The new net was brought, demonstrated without incident, and work resumed.

Within the month the bridge was complete, the wide path cut through the forest, and the two villages joined in an uneasy alliance.

The news of the outbreak of lobo worm was brought to the village of Poli shortly afterwards.

"And they eat their way through the forest at a distance of only a few miles," gasped the messenger. "Many villages are empty, the people having fled or been eaten by the dread lobo."

"Lobo?" asked Lackland.

Chief Dongo explained. "There has not been a march of the lobo worm in my time, God Lackland, although legends tell of them in the past. They are swift and hungry, so it is said, and the only defense is to flee. Terrible are the depredations, and nothing moves in the forest after their passing, for all is dead save the trees."

"Appalling," murmured Lackland. "Doesn't this convince you that we should unite against the common enemy? We will summon our friends in Breda and hold a conference."

"Friends?" queried Dongo. "Conference?"

Since the completion of the road to Breda, Dongo had studiously avoided any reference to

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their supposed allies, and the few occasions of actual trading between the two villages had been specially staged for Lackland's benefit, the bartered goods having been re-exchanged as soon as the large man's back was turned.

The conference sat in the center of the Poli village circle, ringed by the *dweldas* from which interested spectators peered.

"I remember well the last advance of the dread lobo," quavered an incredibly ancient and shrunken Bredan named Maka the Dead by his hopeful heirs. "I remember the fear that struck deep into our bladders as the worm ate its way northwards. At the time the worm advanced on the Bredan side of the River Scraw, although this time, praise God," he smiled in toothless joy, "such is not the case."

Dongo scowled. "It is strange that you are still alive, old man."

Maka explained. "I would have died indeed, as would all Breda, had not our chief of the time conceived a remarkable scheme. At the time, I was chief," he added modestly, "and I reasoned thus.

"Nothing will stop the lobo, save lack of food which causes him to starve, for he lives and breeds and dies very quickly. He eats men, he eats the insects of the forest, the animals, the birds in their nests — even the vile prungle is not safe from the lobo. But if there is no food, he will die fast."

Dongo glanced nervously southwards, hearing in his imagination the chomping of a million jaws. "Tell us how you deprived the lobo of food, old man," he commanded. "And make it quick."

"We did not, for there is food for the lobo everywhere, wherever things move," answered Maka the Dead. He was an old man, and it was many seasons since he had enjoyed a captive audience. The dramatic pause which followed this disappointing statement caused Dongo to finger his spear impatiently.

"Yet you live," snapped the chief. "For the time being," he added significantly.

Maka took the point. "But the lobo does not cross water. He cannot swim," he said, talking fast. "So I caused a trench to be dug around the village, and the trench we joined to the River Scraw nearby, and we filled it with water. The lobo passed by, leaving the village unconsumed. He never came back, for the lobo knows it is useless to retrace his steps, there being little food left on the ground over which he has passed."

"Where did the lobo go?" asked Lackland.

"To the base of the Heights of Hurd, and then away over the grasslands. We were not concerned

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with his destination."

Lackland regarded Dongo. "How long have we got?"

"Two days, I suspect," replied Dongo heavily. "Which is not long enough to build a trench, for the women work but slowly."

"Perhaps if the men dug too, and the men and women of Breda assisted?"

Hota, the Bredan chief, who had had little say so far, jumped to his feet. "This we cannot do," he expostulated. "For the lobo may be on our side of the river too, in which case trenches must be dug around Breda." He shuffled his feet in the dust. "We must go. We must prepare."

"There is no word of an outbreak on your side, Hota," said Lackland patiently. "You will stay and help."

"It is a long way from the river to this village," said Dongo unhappily. "Breda is much nearer the river, being almost on the bank. In their case the scheme is workable, but not in ours."

"What do you suggest, Dongo?" asked Lackland.

"Though my nostrils are sensitive, it seems that we must attempt to enjoy the hospitality of Breda, leaving the worms to pass through Poli and away. We go tomorrow, we stay in their *dweldas* for six days, we return to rebuild, for the lobo will level the village in their search for lice."

The Bredan chief resumed his seat abruptly. "We will assist here," he said. "A trench will be dug with the speed of *kraxa*. Further, I have another idea. South of Poli we will burn the forest, thus killing all living things. The lobo worm, finding no food, will turn aside."

Lackland turned to Dongo. "I trust you now realize the value of cooperation. Let us commence work."

An equitable division of labor was decided upon. The men and women of Poli were to dig the trench around the village, while the women of Breda dug the canal from the River Scraw to supply the water. Meanwhile, the men of Breda would travel southwards and pursue the scorched-earth policy. Lackland sat outside his *dwelda* watching the flailing wooden spades with satisfaction as the people of Poli constructed their moat. The defense was twofold.

He hoped that this example of selfless cooperation would set the tone for the future. More villages would join the group. Tentatively, he imagined an empire.

Two days later the empire, as is the way with empires, crumbled.

Lackland, accompanied by Dongo the chief and Aka the balloon captain, hurried through

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the forest in the direction of the new bridge, then turned along the bank of the Scraw to the place where the canal was being dug.

A peaceful scene met their eyes.

"Where is the water for the moat around Poli?" asked Lackland forcibly.

"Our hearts are heavy like the giant *heff*, which inhabits the northern grasslands," one of the Bredan women replied, sitting dejectedly on a stump.

"Why?"

"Our menfolk are gone into the forest and now become white bones, their flesh having been consumed by the dread lobo."

At this frank voicing of their innermost fears, the remainder of the digging team broke into a shrill keening as they lay relaxed upon the grass.

"Be quiet, women," snapped Lackland. "Your men are safe."

"Have you seen them, your Godship?"

"No," admitted Lackland.

"Unk. It is as we thought, they are dead. They left to light fires, but we have seen no flames, nor even smoke. By now the lobo must be almost upon us, and there is little we can do."

"You have done little enough already," observed Dongo grimly, eyeing the narrow canal which ran for approximately three yards at right angles to the Scraw, and then stopped. "This does not look like two days' work."

"We tried," complained another woman, "but every time we dug, the water brought fang-snappers into our trench with a frightful gnashing of claws."

"You could have dug the trench in dry ground and joined it to the river when it was finished," Lackland pointed out.

"Unk." The woman looked crestfallen. "We are merely women, and consequently stupid," she admitted in a manner unusually honest for her sex. "And we are also weak and idle. Had it been that we were digging to save our own village, we might have succeeded. But we have little love for Poli and were only working to please your Godship, from whose body orifices the very sun gleams forth. Therefore we failed. Given another chance," she continued with a further burst of frankness, "I have no doubt that we would fail again. Such is the way, *sitwa*."

"Where are the menfolk?" asked Lackland. "I cannot imagine they lay in the forest and allowed the lobo to eat them. They must be somewhere." He stared at the trees. "And where are the lobo? They must be close. Come, Dongo, we will explore."

"Not I," said the chief, with studious attention to grammar and meaning.

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"Aka?"

"Me neither," replied the balloon captain. "But I have a plan. You and I, we go aloft on the globba balloons. At this time of day the winds are variable in direction, before the evening onshore breeze brings the dunnets. Tied on a long rope to the village, we will swing over the sky and examine the forest without danger."

Lackland swallowed heavily at the image conjured up. "So be it," he said faintly.

The anchormen were assembled and a long rope prepared. Normally, the skyfishermen employed four ropes and four teams of anchormen, one to each of the huge balloons which were sited at each corner of the rectangular net complex. This had the effect of opening out the nets, at the same time providing a greater degree of control over the entire unit. For the present purposes, however, Aka felt that one rope would suffice.

As they ascended, Lackland gulping unhappily as he clung to the prungle net, the balloons tended to gather together in a bunch. Below them hung the net in a shapeless bag, still full of the previous night's catch of dunnets; due to the emergency these had not been removed to storage. Feathers trailed from the nets like smoke as they rose into the sky.

Lackland hung directly below one of the balloons, his arms through the netting where it was fastened together at the base of the globba plant. Several yards away hung Aka. They peered down. The forest was a long way below.

"See anything?" asked Lackland hoarsely.

"The village of Breda," replied Aka, pointing, hanging with one hand to do so. Safety regulations had been forgotten by the Year of Entropy 5630.

The broad silver ribbon of the River Scraw gleamed directly beneath them; Lackland could see the bridge and, a little way beyond, the circle of *dwelda* huts. A few small figures lounged about the area.

"The men of Breda," grunted Lackland, forgetting fear in his annoyance. Along the gash through the trees which denoted the new road, further forms could be seen walking. "And the women returning."

"It is indeed surprising what can be seen from the sky," remarked Aka. "Many are the tales I could tell you."

"What's that?" asked Lackland suddenly.

The balloons had swung away from the Bredan side of the river; they were now above the rain forest south of Poli. Below them was a clearing where the ground was pale

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in color and shimmering strangely.

"Those are the lobo," said Aka quietly. "They are very close to Poli." Indeed, the village clearing was nearby; the unsuspecting people of Poli staring up at the balloon.

Lackland shuddered. The sight of a solid mass of voracious, carnivorous life immediately below was more unnerving than the height itself. He turned his gaze upwards, examining the surface of his globba galloon with desperate interest.

"Aka," he said faintly, "why is the surface of my globba cracked?"

"Possibly it is overripe," explained the balloon captain, glancing expertly at the pale emerald flesh of the globba above Lackland. "Yes, I should say that is so. I recognize the signs."

"You mean it's about to scatter its spores?"

"I fear so, God Lackland."

"What shall I do, Aka?" Lackland's voice had become a whimper.

The balloon captain thought hard. "Once, when such a thing happened to me," he said, drawing upon years of experience, "I prayed. But it did not help. If a globba is ready to explode, then explode it will and no words of mere men can change that. *Sitwa,* such is the way." Aka hesitated. "If the unthinkable happens," he continued, drawing his knife, "I shall have to cut you loose, otherwise the weight will drag both of us to the ground and ruin the nets."

"You'll abandon me?" screamed Lackland.

"You will fall with comparative gentleness, your Godship. Be assured of that. I remember long ago, *yentro,* I escaped with a mere break of the shoulder. It is only at high altitudes that the globba explodes with violence. Here, it will merely split. You will drift to the ground as a feather drifts, only more swiftly."

"I'll fall among the lobo!"

Aka glanced down. "We are now a little away from the lobo." He returned his interested gaze to Lackland's globba. "I think...almost now..."

Lackland's balloon exploded dully, raining spores like grain, and the orb began to shrink rapidly within the prungle net.

Aka swarmed down his rope, reached the suspended mass of netting and deceased dunnets, and cut Lackland's rope free.

Lackland fell with increasing speed.

He hit the ground untidily and with appalling force, felt something snap and lay groaning faintly, trying to get air into his lungs. He clawed away the prungle net and pieces of globba as they fell lightly

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about him. He gazed around fearfully.

He was in a clearing which he recognized as being very close to the village. Partially recovering his breath, he shouted weakly. He tried to climb to his feet, then fell back as an agonizing pain seared through his right leg. It was broken. Painfully, he began to crawl, dragging himself on his elbows. Frequently he glanced over his shoulder.

Thus he saw the lobo come.

They crept out of the trees on the opposite side of the clearing like an undulating carpet, light grey and shining moistly. There were millions of them in a column thirty yards wide and of unknown length. The light breeze wafted their odor towards him; it was like decaying meat.

He stopped crawling. He could not outpace them. They were near enough for him to be able to make out the individual worms; each was about two inches long and unbelievably active, hopping into the air, burrowing into the ground, reappearing with hardly a pause to continue the inexorable advance.

There was a tiny hole in the smooth grass of the clearing. As the lobo reached it, a terrified mouse-like creature scuttled out, a worm clinging to its flank. The mouse fell to its side, ten feet from Lackland, and the worm disappeared into its body. Then the grey tide surged over the remains....

Lackland screamed.

He heard a series of light thuds to his left, but he was watching the nearest worms, only six feet away. They disappeared into the ground like tiny moles to emerge almost immediately, noticeably larger. Frequently one would fall motionless on its side. Then it would split in two, and each half would commence leaping and burrowing within seconds.

They were five feet away....

They had stopped.

Lackland watched incredulously as the nearest lobo paused, their bounding motion slackening. The entire carpet wavered, shifting, glistening, uncertain.

Then it veered to the left.

As one, the lobo turned, the bounding and diving resumed, and they were on a fresh course. Lackland stared to his left and saw a large feathery heap of dead dunnets in the process of being engorged. Looking up, he saw Aka drifting away, clinging to the nets beneath the globba balloons, scattering a diversionary trail of carrion across the forest.

Then he fainted.

He awoke to find Jixo the Poli doctor-man capering around the *dwelda*, chanting. He felt his leg, gingerly, found it securely bound in

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splints, and relaxed. Jixo had a tendency to place his medical faith in the curative properties of prungle guano. "You may go, Jixo," he said. "Send in Aka and Dongo, with whom I would speak."

The chief arrived, followed by the captain of balloons. "It is good to see you awake, God Lackland," said Aka.

"Thank you for your help, Aka."

"It was nothing." The little green man smiled modestly. "Merely an inspiration which could only occur to a captain of balloons. I trust your leg does not pain you excessively."

"It's comfortable, thank you. The main point is, the lobo were diverted. Poli remains." He regarded them in sudden alarm. "I suppose they will not turn back?"

"They cannot turn back," said Dongo confidently.

"The winds of Finistelle are pumped by the bellows of fate," added Aka obscurely.

"No doubt," said Lackland. "Which way did they go?"

Aka shuffled his feet; he looked sheepish. "With God," he answered. "I merely drifted, scattering the trail." A monstrous suspicion stroked Lackland's mind. "Which way did the lobo go, Dongo?" he asked harshly.

Pinned down, the chief muttered, "It seems they went in the direction of Breda."

"But the River Scraw lies between Poli and Breda."

"They crossed the bridge," stammered Aka. "Which your Godship ordered to be constructed," he added by way of exoneration.

"The winds willed it so, for that way they took Aka's balloon," explained Dongo.

"Take men and go to Breda, you two," snapped Lackland, "and see what can be saved."

The two men glanced at each other. "It is once again a long journey, and I fear we would be too late," said Dongo. "The bridge, being constructed by the men of Breda and consequently flimsy, has collapsed into the River Scraw. After such labor, this is a shameful thing. Although it means that the lobo cannot come back," he finished ingratiatingly.

Lackland scrutinized the two men carefully, then shrugged.

"Go away," he said wearily, closing his eyes.

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"This is the place, driver."

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This dry, witty extrapolation of one woman's battle to liberate herself from the forces of oppression is the first published story of Ms. Stearns, who writes: "I was born in Chicago in 1940. Years later I discovered that undergraduate work and graduate work in philosophy plus $.40 would get you on the bus, so I went into computer programming. I now work as a computer systems analyst with the Bureau of Customs."

Having It

by BARBARA STEARNS

Eleanor Rigby's husband hadn't let her stand on her own two feet for twenty years, that was why she was waiting for Doctor in her new motorized wheelchair. Eleanor had been there for about an hour, they always made you wait an hour. She played with her wheelchair, gunning its motor, so nobody could hear the Muzak.

Nurse said, "Wouldn't you like to read a nice magazine, Mrs. Rigby? While you're waiting."

"Thank," said Eleanor, "you." She did not pick up a nice magazine, they all tried to sell you something. She did not stop making noises with her wheelchair, either.

Eleanor watched Nurse sneak off. Going to spill the beans, that's what she was paid for. Nurse was going to tell Doctor that Eleanor would not read a nice magazine and would not keep her wheelchair quiet. Doctor paid money for the magazines and the Muzak, he wouldn't like it at all. He'd probably take her sooner.

There were a lot of other patients waiting for Doctor. The young ones usually read the magazines, the older ones pretended to.

"How long have you been coming here?" Eleanor asked the young woman next to her.

"About a year, I guess."

"Well," said Eleanor, "I've been coming here for twenty-one years and eight months. They don't let you have it, you know. You just go on and on, they get their fee every month. Once in a while they

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let somebody have it. There was one about a year ago, it prevents law suits. Look, you're just a kid, why don't you quit?"

"But it must be due by now, I don't want to quit."

"You better quit, kid, you'll wind up in a wheelchair like me. They aren't going to let me have it, and they won't let you, either."

"Why, Mrs. Rigby," said Nurse, sneaking up on her rubber soles. "You've been frightening the patients again. You mustn't let Mrs. Rigby scare you, honey, she's a great kidder. Aren't you a great kidder, Mrs. Rigby?"

"No," said Eleanor.

"It's time for our appointment," said Nurse, pushing the wheelchair. Eleanor floored it and shot down the corridor doing forty miles an hour, and Nurse couldn't do anything about it. Unless you damaged property, Nurse was helpless. Eleanor idled on the scales, weighing herself while she waited for Nurse to catch up.

Nurse tottered in, hand over heart, eyes rolled up. "Mercy, whatever possessed you? Doctor hates it when patients do things like that."

"I didn't gain any weight," Eleanor said smugly. "Maybe I even lost some."

"Have you been sticking to your diet? Taking your pills? You should have gained ten pounds. At this rate you'll be mobile enough to get out of that wheelchair soon. You've been cheating, Mrs. Rigby." Nurse sneaked out on her rubber soles, leaving Eleanor to wait for Doctor, who was late as usual.

"Well, well, well," said Doctor. "I hear it was you who nearly ran me over in the corridor. I just hate it when patients do things like that. I dart in and out of the corridor all the time, you could have hit me. I don't know why you patients want four forward speeds on those things, it's dangerous."

"Tell you what," said Eleanor. "You let me have it and I'll never speed down your corridor again."

"Well, well, well. Let's not be hasty."

"Look, I've been coming here for twenty-two years, when can I have it?"

"You've put all these years into it. We don't want to have it before it's ready, do we?"

"You are going to let me have it, aren't you?"

"Nurse says you've stopped reading the nice magazines and don't like the Muzak and you haven't gained any weight and you've been frightening the other patients. Telling them I won't let them have it. Why, I let one have it about a year ago. Nurse thinks you haven't been taking your medicine."

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"Of course I've been taking my medicine," said Eleanor indignantly. She hadn't taken medicine for a couple of months, she had flushed it down the toilet.

"Well, well, well. Nurse isn't often wrong. Perhaps you've built up a resistance. Let me see, there was that nice young man from the drug company with samples the other day. We'll try some of these, pretty color aren't they? Let me see what the pamphlet said. Where did I put that pamphlet? Never mind, go on and take one."

Eleanor rolled over to the sink and swallowed some water in a paper cup. She palmed the pill.

"I can't find that pamphlet. That's all right, take them one with breakfast and one with dinner. If they were dangerous, drug companies wouldn't send young men around with them like candy."

"I don't want new pills, I just want to have it."

"Now hand the pills back, so I'll know what they are and I can give you a prescription for them."

"I do not think I'm being unreasonable about this. It's legal and I've put twenty-two years into it. If that isn't ready, I don't know what is."

"Just because it's legal doesn't mean a thing when it comes to nature. By nature it's still immature and I can't let you have it yet."

"Look, there's a patient in your waiting room who must be a hundred years old. I'll be damned if I wait that long."

"She's eighty-eight. She was one of my grandfather's patients and my father's after him, and now she's mine. I don't think she'll keep long enough to pass on to my son, and it's a pity. She just waits for hers quietly."

"Just tell me how much longer."

"Hasn't that pill started working yet? Well, well, well. You are becoming very resistant to drugs, and I don't have all day to find something that works. You can't hurry nature, nature takes its time."

"I think you just make nature up to stop me from having it."

"Aaaaaagh," cried Doctor, hitting the button that summoned Nurse. "Next month we'll have to try something much stronger, something big enough to choke a horse."

Eleanor let Nurse push her down the corridor and into the hall. She gave the elevator button a whack and buried the new pill in the sand set out for cigarettes. Her palm had turned blue. Eleanor took a tissue and scrubbed her hand vigorously, hoping the blue would come off. It didn't.

Now she was supposed to go and spend money. Eleanor was tired of

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clothes; no matter how hard you tried, they would pretty soon tell you you were tacky. She already had plenty of fly swatters that looked cunningly like bugs, and Harry had too many neckties, and there was a lifetime supply of towels at home. People were staring at her; she was with stores all around her, and she wasn't buying anything. Harry would notice if her appointment with Doctor didn't produce bills from downtown stores.

Eleanor rolled into a bookstore. There were large books with glossy pictures, they were expensive enough and would do. Eleanor wouldn't have to read them, just put them on the cocktail table. She rolled away from them. There were salespeople following her, so Eleanor got a trashy novel. It wasn't even hardcover and it only cost $1.50. She knew there ought to be a bill for it, but paid cash. What with postage both ways, clerical time, computer time, a $1.50 trashy novel should come to $2.00 by the time it was paid for. Eleanor was screwing the economy and knew it.

Eleanor went home and washed her half of the breakfast dishes. She cleaned her half of the bedroom and picked up her half of the mess in the living room. Then she made herself a large Bloody Mary and settled down with the trashy novel. On page two the pigs were already balling in the bathtub. Nobody's vagina itches from soap in trashy novels.

She heard him before she saw him. Harry came home and tripped over his golf bag. "Eleanor? Eleanor." Harry came into the living room, brandishing a golf ball. "You didn't put it away, I damned near killed myself."

Eleanor finished the Bloody Mary. It wasn't her golf ball.

"Eleanor, the living room is a mess." Harry tore off his necktie, he always did and he always kicked off his shoes before he got to the bedroom to change. "Good God, come here. You only made half the bed today. My clothes, all in a heap. Eleanor."

Eleanor chewed on an ice cube and wiped her mouth.

"Eleanor, honey, you didn't even do the breakfast dishes. You haven't started dinner. What's the matter?"

"You want a Bloody Mary?" He hadn't noticed that half the house was cleaned up. Maybe her mess was invisible, maybe she never had had to clean up her own mess since Harry couldn't see it.

"What happened to your hand? It's all blue."

Eleanor said, "Harry, Doctor says I can't have it yet. I'm sick and tired of this, I want to have it."

"But I just bought you a new wheelchair." Harry was baffled.

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"This isn't like you at all."

"It is me. Me, Eleanor, I want to have it."

Harry stamped into the bedroom and started throwing things, mumbling and slamming drawers. He shut the bedroom door, and Eleanor heard the snick of the lock. She rolled down the hall and listened, Harry was talking to somebody on the telephone. Eleanor beat it back into the living room.

Harry came out of the bedroom and sat on the edge of his reclining electric massage chair. "Eleanor, I want you to trust me, everything's going to be all right."

Eleanor said, "Who were you talking to in there?"

"Doctor says somebody buries a blue pill in the cigarette sand on his floor, and it had your fingerprints on it. I think maybe, well."

"Doctor fingerprinted a pill? Harry, why don't you close your eyes and let that chair vibrate you for a while. You always like that, it'll make you feel better."

Eleanor rolled out on the patio. She hated the patio, it was hot and had bugs. She would rather be inside, but Harry needed to relax. Harry was peeking at her from behind the drapes, it was creepy. She was going to have to do something about Harry. Eleanor read the trashy novel with great determination.

Harry, Doctor and three men she didn't know came up on her. They were all smiling nervously, and Doctor said, "Well, well, well." The three strange men strapped Eleanor's arms down and put her in a car. Harry and Doctor kept saying that everything was going to be all right, and the three other men kept saying that they were going to help her. Everything being out of her control, Eleanor did not say anything.

They drove her to a mental installation, and Eleanor said "Goddamn," so Harry signed her in, and they gave her a shot. Then they took her new motorized wheelchair away and gave her one she had to push around by hand. Eleanor said "Goddamn" again, so they gave her another shot.

Senior Analyst's office was very expensive, it was so expensive it didn't even look like an office. Eleanor wondered what Analyst was going to buy with the proceeds of her treatment. Analyst himself was so expensive that Eleanor assumed he was part of the furnishings until he spoke.

"I'm glad you like it, Mrs. Rigby, I like it a lot myself. It's a first-class installation. Please sit over there. I may call you Eleanor, of course."

"No," said Eleanor.

"Now, Eleanor, what we will be doing is making some tests to locate

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the trouble. Once we've found the bug we can trace back in your system and see what's making you deviate from your specifications. Doctor has been keeping a good inspection record, but even so we can't eliminate the possibility of a hardware malfunction. There's nothing to be ashamed of, Eleanor, the thing is to find those bugs and alter your macros so you can execute properly."

"What specifications?" said Eleanor. "Whose?"

"Aha," said Analyst and looked pleased. "While you're having your hardware checked out, I need some output to look at. Your bug seems to be that you want to have it."

"Not at all," said Eleanor. "My bug is that Harry and Doctor won't let me."

"I see," said Analyst. "You are miserable because you think you want to have it. This is almost certainly a programming error."

"I do want to have it and I will," said Eleanor, exasperated. "And I demand to see my specifications."

"I see you have a sense of humor," said Analyst. "That's good."

Eleanor said, "I don't want any specifications."

"Civilization depends upon specifications. If you chafe at yours, you haven't been programmed properly. Now let's open your file and start dumping from the beginning."

"Civilization doesn't work like that."

"Eleanor, if you blow on your open one more time, I'll have to take serious measures. Perhaps scratch your files."

Eleanor did not want her files scratched. She said, ".....K....P .....OOOOOOO.....WA..WA....."

"I can't wait for you to cooperate. Your husband is paying me to find that bug, and find it I will. I'm going to force you to abend now. One, two, three, sysudump."

"C6E4C3D2..." said Eleanor.

"Aha, that's better."

"...40E80CE4 40C1D5C4 40E3C8C5 40C8C5D3 D340E6C9 E3C840C9 E34B4040 C940C1D4 405D6E3 40C7D6C9 D5C740E3 D640E2E3 C9C3D240 C1D9D6E4 D5D44050 407C6E3 40C4E4D4 D7C5C44B..."

"Your time is up. That was very hostile. Try to remember your dreams for tomorrow."

Eleanor had her hardware checked out, ate supper and went to bed. Eleanor lay awake for a long time, resenting her specifications, wondering how she could have them rewritten. She decided the best thing would be for her to figure out how Harry and Doctor had prevented her from having it, so she could bypass them. Eleanor

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thought about this for quite a while. Suddenly she gave out a great yell and sat bolt upright in bed.

Attendants came running and gave her a shot, but it was too late, she was having it. An attendant sat in her room so she couldn't have it until Analyst came the next morning. Eleanor bit her blanket so she wouldn't yelp again, and she held the sides of her bed tightly. The attendant fell asleep within an hour, so Eleanor got into the wheelchair and rolled herself out of the room. She could always says she was going to the bathroom, they'd believe that.

She called all the newspapers and television networks and radio stations. She told them she expected to have it at any moment. Eleanor said it was going to be an opera, operas always got reviews, they'd send reporters for sure. Eleanor was curious herself to see what it was going to be. It might be a painting or a legal reform or an astrophysical discovery, damned if she knew.

Eleanor went down and waited on the long gravel driveway. The reporters came in ones and twos and teams. Eleanor was expanding and contracting, and her face was red; the wheelchair shook mightily, and its screws came loose and flew in all directions. Flashbulbs popped and reporters scribbled, Eleanor's eyes bugged out, she answered all kinds of questions, the wheelchair rattled, one of its wheels came off and careened down the driveway. There was a terrific bang, and Eleanor had it.

"That isn't an opera," said a music critic as he went off to call the financial editor, "but it is one hell of a production."

Eleanor had one of the biggest conglomerates in the world. It had assets of $56.7 billion dollars, owned sixteen petroleum corporations, twelve shipping lines, twenty-four airlines, seventy-seven electronics corporations, controlled 30 percent of the world's communications networks, was a fast comer in geothermal power production and also had a lot of other stuff. For tax purposes it supported cultural events and had its own foundation which studied poverty and gave scholarships.

Eleanor was amazed. "I didn't know I had it in me," she said. The wheelchair had completely disintegrated, and she was sitting on the gravel. Eleanor picked herself up and stood on her feet for the first time in twenty-two years.

"You just bought out this mental installation," said one of the reporters. "Do you think this sort of thing is a good investment?"

"Obviously," Eleanor snapped, "or I wouldn't have bought control." She walked into the main

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building and signed herself out.

"You can't do that," Analyst protested, running up and out of breath. "You're my patient."

"There may be some staff changes," Eleanor said pointedly. "And my people will have to watch their audits very carefully, I'm suspicious their financing has been wild. Still, this has been a very profitable operation, and I'm sure it can better its cost-profit ratio with better management."

"See here," said Analyst. "I won't allow all this."

NBC said to him, "She's Eleanor Warren now, she bought this place out."

Analyst looked at him blankly. "She's Eleanor Rigby, she's deviating from her specifications. I know very well who she is, she's Harry Rigby's wife."

"She used to be," said WWNEWS. "She had it this morning, Ms. Warren's conglomerate owns this place from the grass up. Ms. Warren, are you going to maintain residence in the United States?"

"Taxes are high here," said Eleanor, "but the loophoes are attractive. I'll have my people check into whether a change in residence is desirable."

"She is too Harry Rigby's wife," Analyst persisted. "This conglomerate business isn't in her specifications."

"I agree," Eleanor said to Analyst, "that 'wife' does imply a certain set of specifications, so will you please note that I do not in any way conform to them. Therefore 'Harry Rigby's wife' does not apply to me. Fighting the owner is rash behavior for an employee, I'm sure you'll want to reconsider your attitude. It's late and I must be getting on with it. Call a general staff meeting at three, I'll send someone out to brief you on what to expect in the future. In the meantime, welcome to the Eleanor Warren family of prosperous enterprises. I assure you that no competent staff member need fear for her or his job."

"But what will I tell Doctor?" asked Analyst. "What will I tell Harry Rigby?"

A silver Rolls Royce with a reading lamp and two telephones in the back seat came up the drive. The reporters stood back respectfully to let it pass. Not a speck of dust marred its gleaming fenders, not one fingerprint dulled its chrome, not one bird had dared to defile it. The chauffeur leaped out from behind the wheel and opened the passenger door.

"What will I tell them?" Analyst asked again.

"Ms. Warren, is it true you're investing a million dollars in the President's campaign?"

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"Don't be stupid, he isn't worth a million dollars. I can't think of one living politician who's worth that much. Please let me through to my car."

"What do you think about the economy, Ms. Warren?"

"I think about it incessantly, that's why I'm rich. Now, please let me through."

"Ms. Warren, Ms. Warren, about the unemployment situation?"

"Inflation, Ms. Warren? The price of gold?"

Eleanor Warren shook off the crowd of reporters and got into the shining Rolls Royce. She turned on the reading lamp, adjusted her glasses and began reading the reports which had been prepared for her by her staff. The silver Rolls went slowly down the driveway, avoiding television cables whenever possible. Ms. Warren controlled one of the networks, and her chauffeur didn't think she'd like it if he damaged any of her equipment.

"She never told me," said Analyst, bewildered. "What do I tell Harry?"

ABOUT THE COVER: This painting shows astronauts exploring a small crater in the polar region of Mars. The ground is partly covered by whitish deposits which could be water ice or carbon dioxide "snow" or a mixture of both. In the foreground an astronaut collects rock samples from the inner wall, while his colleague takes off on a "flying platform" — a device which could give greater mobility than ground transport, with a range of up to 25 miles. The haze visible over the polar caps, recorded by Mariner spacecraft, is visible here only by the slight violet tint it imparts to the sky; from ground level it is probably quite transparent. Painting by David Hardy from *Challenge of the Stars* by David A. Hardy and Patrick Moore, Mitchell Beazley, 1972 (published in the U.S. by Rand McNally).

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ISAAC ASIMOV

SCIENCE

The Cruise And I

In the introduction to last month's article, "The Triumph of The Moon" (F & SF, June 1973), I casually mentioned having stood on the deck of a liner off Florida. It occurs to me that I ought not let it go at that. The Noble Editor on occasion permits me* to write an autobiographic article when some aspect of my life may be of interest to science fiction readers, and surely a trip to see a far-distant rocket launching might be considered as falling in that category.

Especially so, since I am notoriously a non-traveller, and my faithful Gentle Readers may wish to know how I came to make the trip and how I survived it.

The truth is that only twice in my life, prior to the cruise of the good ship, *Statendam*, have I crossed the ocean and neither time was it voluntary.

At the age of three, I was taken from Europe to America. I *had* to go; my parents insisted. I presume we travelled steerage. Fortunately I remember nothing about it.

While I was serving with the army, proudly bearing the exalted rank of buck-private, I made my second sea voyage, this time from San Francisco to Hawaii. Again I had to go; a sergeant seemed to

*Nay, even encourages me.

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expect it of me. I travelled on what seemed to be a converted garbage-scow in which first class was steerage. Unfortunately, I remember this voyage.

With that kind of record, I reacted with stubborn silence when, in late spring 1972, I was approached by Richard C. Hoagland, who was aflame with the desire to lead a party of idealists southward to see the launch of Apollo 17. He was 27 years old and 127 years enthusiastic.

It was, he explained, the last manned expedition to the Moon in the Apollo series; probably the last of any kind for decades to come. It was, he explained further, the only night launch in the series and would be a spectacular sight; especially since we would be watching it from the sea, with the sky clear from horizon to horizon.

I pointed out an insuperable objection. "But it's almost a thousand miles away," I said, "and I get separation anxiety as soon as I am out of sight of my study."

"Fine," he said, "I'll put down your name. No longer will people be able to sneer contemptuously when they say that Isaac Asimov, the greatest science fiction writer alive, has never seen a rocket launching."

"Is that what people do?" I asked.

"Sneer contemptuously?"

"No, say I am the greatest science fiction writer alive."

"I have it in writing and notarized," he said.

So I went. After all, I have my position to think of.

I boarded the *Statendam* shortly after 2 P.M. on Monday, December 4, 1972. I was all set to give speeches, to participate in the discussions, to lead seminars, and to cower in my bunk; not necessarily in that order.

On board, I found four other science fiction writers. There was Robert A. Heinlein, with whom I had shared nearly four years of precarious desk duty during the arduous days of World War II. There was Theodore Sturgeon, looking like Don Quixote in buckskin. There was Frederik Pohl who, at various times in the 34 years since we first met, has been my agent, my editor, my collaborator, and, always, my friend. And there was Ben Bova, who last year stepped into the difficult shoes of John W. Campbell as editor of *Analog*.

By a curious coincidence, Hoagland had had written evidence to prove that each one of them was the best science fiction writer alive.

Bob Heinlein, who had been at Annapolis in his time, introduced me to the mysteries of sea-going cryptography. The front of the ship was the prow. You went forward to go toward it and aft to go away from it. When you stood facing forward, your left was port and your right was starboard.

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I asked Bob why this was, and he said it was part of the Mosaic code as handed down from Sinai.

The floors, he said, were decks, and the windows were portholes. We were on the port side when he said this, and I nodded with ready intelligence.

"I see," I said. "The windows on the other side are starboardholes, right?"

He hit me with a marlinspike.

At five to four I made my way out to a place on the side of the ship where I could hang on to a railing and witness whatever was going to happen at four o'clock when the ship was scheduled to leave. A sleety drizzle filled the air, it being a typical fine December day in New York. It slowly froze me to the deck, for the ship did not leave till six o'clock, and as it bleared through the smog, we all waved goodbye to the New York skyline.

I met Norman Mailer during the wait. He was on board to represent the non-science fiction literary response to the space effort, assuming that anything that is non-science-fiction can be considered literary.

The first and only previous time I had ever met him was in an elevator in the midtown building in which (unknown to me) he maintained an office. We were the only ones in the elevator. I studied his shock of iron-gray hair and said to him, "Has anyone ever told you you look like Norman Mailer?"

"A few people," he said, and got off.

This time I introduced myself, and he told me he read "Asimov's Guide to Science" every morning while meditating. I congratulated him on his taste in reading matter.

On board also was a white-haired fragile lady named Katherine Anne Porter. I had no sooner had her pointed out to me when an extraordinarily clever witticism occurred to me. It was clear that her mere presence made of us a sort of "ship of fools."

I sought out Fred Pohl. "Do you know Katherine Anne Porter is on board?" I said, neatly setting him up for the kill.

"Yes," he said, "It makes us rather a ship of fools, right?"

I thought it a foolish remark.

My first meal on board introduced me to the rigors of life on ship-board. I had already discovered the elevators, the boutique, the library, the fifteen bars and lounges, and now I was handed a dinner menu modelled on feasts given by the more decadent Roman emperors. Having

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ascertained the meals were included in the price of the cruise, I ordered one of everything.

The waiters were all Indonesians, more or less fresh from the old country, so that they were still underdeveloped enough to be quiet, industrious, efficient, and pleasant. It was disconcerting, but we all forced ourselves to be tolerant of their strange foreign ways.

Somewhere in the course of the meal, a sudden spasm of dizziness struck me. It was for all the world as though the entire room had swayed. I auto-diagnosed a small stroke and was grateful that the ship's doctor (a handsome, sombre man in an admiral's uniform) was at my very table.

"Sir," I said, anxiously, "the room seemed to sway just now, and I suspect I suffered —"

"Yes, the sea is a little rough," he said.

I decided not to mention my stroke. He was a busy man.

Marvin Minsky, who works on robots at M.I.T., called across from the next table to ask me how far I thought the ship was swaying. I made a quick, shrewd estimate of the angle and said I didn't know.

Whereupon he pointed to a pencil he had attached to a fork so that it dangled over the table and said, "Hardly at all. Maybe two degrees. That should make everybody feel better."

I don't think it did. (Later in the cruise, Marvin, who has a magnificently bald head, put on a Charles II wig and, in the guise of a fan, came to me with baited breath and humbly asked for my autograph. He said it was his ambition to grow up to be like me. I gave him my autograph in the kindest and most condescending way and patted his head.)

It was not until the second day that I decided that I was *not* going to be sea-sick. Once I had reached that decision I went off to serve as angel of mercy to those of my colleagues who were not as talented as I.

To my indignation, there were surprisingly few who suffered. Late in cruise I discovered that Carl Sagan (the well-known astronomer from Cornell) did not take kindly to the swaying of the ship. At once I told him, in full and affecting detail, of the exact manner in which the various ship's motions failed to affect me, attributing my immunity to nausea to superior genes and a ready intelligence.

Carl showed no signs of gratitude.

I was less adaptable to the chief indoor sport of sea-going mankind, which consisted of the continuous and steady consumption of a variety of spirituous liquors. The shipping line cooperated with this fully, and an indefinite supply of strong drink was made available to all.

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This made life hard for me, since the continuous and steady consumption of as much as one small jigger of wine reduces me to a state of swinish intoxication. I was forced to such subterfuges as asking for a glass of ice water and then sneaking an olive into it.

At 10:30 the second morning, we had a boat drill. We had to put on warm clothing and a kind of life-preserver. Then we went out on the upper promenade deck (if that's what it was called) and clustered about the life-boats assigned to us.

I didn't like the symbolism of the whole thing, and someone who noted the concern on my finely-chiselled features said, "Women and children first, Asimov."

"Women, children, and *geniuses,*" I replied, haughtily.

"*Young* geniuses," said a twenty-two-year-old whippersnapper behind me.

Actually, the ship became home very quickly and I lost all terror of the sea. In fact, it was on land that the worst dangers were to be found.

On Saturday, the 9th, we reached St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands and were driven in an open bus in a kind of mid-summer heat that was most unusual for December. I mentioned the matter to the driver, but it only seemed to confuse him. "What heat-wave?" he asked.

Since he insisted on driving on the left-hand side of the road, it was obviously useless to expect intelligent conversation from him. (Everyone else drove on the left-hand side, too. Ridiculous!)

We stopped off at what had once been the governor's mansion, and I got into a conversation with a gentleman who explained that the island's water source was rainfall. This was wonderful, except in droughts. The previous summer, he said, had been extraordinarily dry. From his house on the hill he could see innumerable squalls out on the Atlantic. Every single one of them, he said, had missed the island, despite his own best efforts to lure them into the right direction by the use of body English.

Now, of course (he concluded), it was the dry season. I looked up at the gathering clouds and said, "Are you sure?"

"Oh, there might be a light tropical storm," he admitted, casually, "but it will only last five or ten minutes."

On the way back to the ship, there was a light tropical storm. It lasted five hours and some three inches of rain fell.

The next day, we were in Puerto Rico, and the plan was to get a look at Arecibo (two and a half hours away by dubious bus) where we would see the world's largest radio telescope.

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Having spent all night wringing myself out, I looked up at the sky and said, "I don't think I'll go. It looks like rain."

"You're judging by New York skies," someone said, "Here in sunny Puerto Rico, the Sun shines 360 days a year." He showed me a propaganda leaflet put out by the chamber of commerce and that, indeed, was what it said.

Sure enough, even as I read it, the Sun popped smilingly out from behind the clouds, so I got on the bus. The Sun at once popped smilingly into the clouds and it rained heavily all the way to Arecibo. Too late, I realized the propaganda leaflet had failed to say how *long* the Sun shone on each of the 360 days.

The bus ride began in what seemed to be one of the slum areas of the island. We had not quite emerged from that slum area two and a half hours later when we reached our destination. The last five or six miles was up a precipious mountain side along a road that made a right-angle curve every five feet. The driver blew his horn melodiously at every curve, taking his hand off the wheel each time.

I was quite sure I would never experience a rottener ride, and I didn't — until an hour and a half later when we went down that same road. There was more sea-sickness on the bus than on the ship, and there was a rush for dramamine pills. I used my own methods and clung tightly to the nearest girl.

The thousand-foot radio telescope was a magnificently impressive sight, though, and was easily almost worth the trip. They had a kind of ski-lift that would raise any maniac to the huge devices far above the big bowl itself. There was also a cat-walk that stretched out for hundreds of feet, high up over blank emptiness. We were told it had a rudimentary railing that would serve to delay our fall a moment or two, and a flooring of slats with enough space in between to drop you half-through.

Some of the party decided to break the rules and make use of these devices. I did not crowd forward, however, since I didn't like to be pushy, and in the end I never got to go. I was philosophical about it.

On the second morning of the cruise, right after the boat drill, we all got down to the serious business of the cruise. Ken Franklin, of the American Museum of Natural History, started us off with a rousing keynote speech, and I settled back to a week or more of pure enjoyment, pure relaxation, pure somnolence — but I began to worry.

It seems there were reporters on board — narrow-eyed, cynical and sophisticated men — who found fault with the food, the accommodations,

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the arrangements, the personnel. The only thing they didn't find fault with, as near as I could see, was the liquor — and they might have, in between drinks, if there had been any in-between-drinks for them.

Alas, I thought. They will write narrow-eyed, cynical and sophisticated articles making fun of the cruise* and it will be up to me to do what I can to make things better.

So to begin with, I persuaded the men in charge to allow Hugh Downs to moderate the discussions. He had come aboard to do some announcing in the last stages of the launch countdown, and I thought there was no point in wasting his professional expertise. It was an inspiration. He kept the sessions in perfect shape. It was a pity he left us at St. Thomas.

On Wednesday, the 6th, Ben Bova started the day with a pleasant talk on space exploration. He did so without benefit of a public address system. The efforts of twelve high-powered scientists to deal with a recalcitrant microphone came to naught. I did not involve myself, of course, since my own level of engineering competence is limited. I can, with considerable skill push a switch down, if it happens to be up; or up, if it happens to be down; but beyond that, I am shaky.

Ben had completed his speech when the ship's engineer was located in some obscure corner of the vessel and brought in. He looked at the switch on the microphone, noted it was down, and pushed it up. Instantly the miracle of electronic amplification of sound was upon us, and I was sorry I had not volunteered to help. Switch-pushing is my engineering specialty.

Actually, the public address system gave us trouble all through. So did the slide projectors. So did the overhead lights. So did the screen-lowering device. Technology defeated us at every turn, and we were all thankful that we weren't in charge of the countdown then proceeding on the Florida shore.

On the next to the last night of the cruise, for instance, Ken Franklin set up eight slide projectors and a recorded commentary on the flat part of the ship in the rear (the stern, I think). By clever manipulation of the various projectors he planned to have the next best thing to an actual planetarium show.

Unfortunately, there seemed no way of arranging wires to run the projectors without also blowing a fuse. Ken had to improvise a speech and

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**They did, as a matter of fact. They let it be known that they themselves were far too superior in every respect to enjoy themselves, and they all reached the very tip-top heights of wit by mentioning the presence of Miss Porter and implying that we were a ship of fools. Thank the good Lord for reportorial wit, say I.*

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carried it off magnificently without any visual aids other than the stars in the sky. The sky was partly cloudy, however, and the cloud-removal device did not work, either.

My own first speech on Wednesday dealt with the possibility of colonizing the asteroids, and I sawed the air pretty effectively. Norman Mailer, who followed me, referred to me as a "distinguished writer" and spoke of my "brilliant speech." I tried to look modest and nearly succeeded.

Mailer then went on to give a most unusual speech of his own, intending to serve as a "devil's advocate." He deplored the fact that we were left with only two diseases, the common cold, and the ubiquitous "virus," and bemoaned the loss of the diseases of yesteryear: diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid and all the rest of the jolly bunch. He also speculated on the existence of ghostly spirits in a "thanatosphere" around the Earth (a suggestion I had last seen mentioned in Dickens' "A Christmas Carol") and plumped strenuously for experimentation on the Moon in the fields of levitation, ESP, and magic generally.

The rest of us managed to be unconvinced.

Mailer left at St. Thomas, and Carl Sagan joined us there. On Monday and Tuesday, the 11th and 12th, he delivered three speeches which were absolutely magnificent; particularly a two-hour presentation of the new views of Mars resulting from the latest photographs taken by a rocket sent into an orbit about the planet.

At one point, I raised my hand. "Carl," I said, "didn't you predict all this out of purely theoretical considerations a couple of years before the Mars-probe was sent out, and didn't the photographs prove you exactly right?"

"Yes, Isaac," he said, "but I thought I would leave that unmentioned as a matter of modesty." And he beamed at the audience.*

But, of course, everything, everything — Sagan's speech on Mars, Mailer's role as devil's advocate, Fred Pohl's charming speech in which he defined progress as that which opened more options to mankind — served only as a background for the real purpose of the cruise, the viewing of the launching of Apollo 17.

Increasing excitement pervaded the ship all that Wednesday,

**The reporters left with Mailer, so Mailer's speech got a big play afterward and Sagan's went unmentioned. Next to reportorial wit, I suppose there is nothing better than reportorial judgement.*

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December 16. The ship had anchored off the Florida coast during the day and the giant rocket stood out against the flat Florida coast like a misplaced Washington Monument.

The day darkened; night came; clouds banked on the eastern horizon; and there was a continuous display of faraway lightning-without-thunder ducking in and out of the distant thunderheads. The countdown proceeded toward the 9:53 zero-minute and only I worried. There had never been any hitch, any hold, any delay in an Apollo launch, but, on the other hand, it was an undeniable fact that I had never watched one, either.

I was not quite myself then when Hugh Downs interviewed me for the benefit of the ship's passengers in those last minutes before the launch. By the time I broke away, almost every spot on every railing was occupied. I found a place at last on the upper promenade deck, which had been left unoccupied because brilliant lights over the ping-pong table reduced everything else to a blur. Nor was there silence, for with the launch ten minutes away, several members of the crew were engaged in a heart-stopping, nerve-wrenching game of ping-pong.

Richard Hoagland passed me. "Dick," I cried, "get me a good spot, will you, old boy, and don't put me under the painful necessity of tearing your heart out."

He dragged me through numberless corridors up to the bridge and to a hidden spot he had saved.

"What if something goes wrong?" I asked.

"How can anything go wrong?" asked Dick. "There's less than a minute to the launching."

"T minus 30 seconds and holding," said the radio.

I knew it! I knew it!

And I knew what would be the worst of what was to come, too. The radio would now indulge in its own particular cancer, the inability to tolerate a soothing silence.

For two and a half hours, the cultured and pleasant voice of the radio announcer maintained a steady commentary about nothing at all. Sentence followed sentence, paragraph followed paragraph, with a smoothly unwinding and unvarying content of zero; a soft and irritating repetition of nothing, goose-egg, naught, nil, cipher; round and round in infinite variation of a non-theme.

Mailer had said sardonically that NASA had succeeded in making mankind's greatest adventure dull. Difficult? Not at all. In a world which has forgotten the virtue of silence, anything can be forced into dullness.

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Not that the cultured voice dripped on forever. At periodic intervals, the forces of radio paid homage to their economic gods by running off a few singing commercials and ebullient sales messages at an enhanced sound level.

It was not till 12:20 A.M., with Dick Hoagland on the bridge, telling the Captain that he would have to keep the ship at the cape for another day because he had written and notarized proof that the Captain was the best mariner in the world, when all the holds were over and the countdown began to proceed toward zero.

But by then it was past midnight, and only I, on the entire ship, seemed aware that we had slipped into Pearl Harbor Day. But zero was reached and a cloud of vapor enveloped the rocket. I held my breath and waited for it to rise in sick suspense.

It did rise, at last, and the vast red flower at its tail bloomed. What was surely the most concentrated man-made light on an enormous scale that the world had ever seen illuminated the night-bound shores of Florida.

As I said briefly in my introduction last month, the night vanished from horizon to horizon. We, and the ship, and all the world we could see, were suddenly under the dim copper dome of a sky from which the stars had washed out, while below us the black sea turned an orange-gray.

In the deepest silence, the artificial sun that had so changed our immediate world rose higher and higher, and then — forty seconds after ignition — the violent shaking of the air all about the rocket engines made its way across the seven miles of sea that separated us and the shore, and reached us. With the rocket high in the air, we were shaken with a rumbling thunder so that our private and temporary day was accompanied by a private and temporary earthquake.

Sound and light ebbed majestically as the rocket continued to rise until it was a ruddy blotch in the high sky. The night was falling once more; the stars were coming out and the sea darkened. In the sky there was a flash as the second stage came loose, and then the rocket was a star among stars; moving, and moving, and moving, and growing dimmer —

And in all this, it was useless to try to speak, for there was nothing to say. The words and phrases had not been invented that would serve as an accompaniment to that magnificent leap to the Moon and I did not try to invent any.

Had I had the time and the folly, and had I not been utterly crushed under sights and sounds so much greater than anything I had ever experienced, I might have tried to apostrophize the world about me and

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say: Oh, wonder of wonders! Oh, soaring spirit of man, that conquers space, and reaches indomitably toward the stars —

But I couldn't, and I didn't, and it was some young man behind me who contributed the unspoken accompaniment to the rise of the spaceship.

With all the magnificent resources of the English language at his command, he chose the phrase which perhaps most intimately expressed his inner workings.

"Oh, shit," he said, as his head tilted slowly upward. And then, with his tenor voice rising over all the silent heads on board, he added, "Oh, *shi-i-i-i-i-it!*"

Well, to each his own. I said nothing.

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Quite a few of Robert Young's stories have concerned themselves with giantism. Here's a superior addition, a gripping tale of a primitive race who creates a monster in the form of a beautiful giantess, and of a professional hunter brought in to kill her. That's where it begins...

The Giantess

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Strophe

Hill halted at the base of the hogback to re-sling his '02 Weslich. It was a heavy piece, and he did not wish it to encumber him while he was climbing the ridge. This time he slung it diagonally, leaving both arms free. It did not interfere with his overnight pack, nor with the wide belt that supported his canteen, his two-way radio and an extra cartridge clip. In leaving his fly-buggy, he had taken no other weapon: if he couldn't bag Cheida with an '02 Weslich, he couldn't bag her, period.

The question arises why, with so formidable an obstacle as the hogback still separating him from her demesne, he should have chosen to go the rest of the way on foot. The answer lay partly in the impossibility of his getting off a good shot from a moving aircraft and partly in his desire to catch her unawares. Were she to see the fly-buggy come down, she would be alerted, and bagging her then would be a ticklish operation. It was true her valley was a vast one and she might at the moment be on its far side, remote enough from the hogback not to be able to see the little fly-buggy land. But in Hill's profession you took nothing for granted: you played the hand you were dealt and never asked for an unknown card.

He started up the side of the hogback, digging the pointed toes of his black Beowulf boots into the bank. Small trees afforded him occasional handholds, and in places shale ledges provided erratic stairs. He had been off booze for a month and was in superb condition. When he neared the end of the

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climb, he slowed his pace and inched his way the final few feet to the top. He saw a grassy promenade dotted with bushes on which big red berries grew. He moved on all fours across it and surveyed Cheida's demesne from the concealment of the tall grass.

Midsummer haze dimmed the details of the valley, reduced the farther slope to a bluish blur. A river wandered down from mountains on the north, wound its way across the prairie-like terrain to green hills on the south. Trees grew thickly along its banks, forming an anfractuous forest. There were a number of widely scattered rock formations, and far to the northeast, well beyond the river, a little lake shone dully in the afternoon rays of Alpha Aurigae. Semicircling it was a stand of sequoia-like trees.

Hill saw no sign of his quarry. Nevertheless, he knew she was somewhere in the valley. The Hujiri had told him she was childlike in more ways than one and kept irregular hours. More than likely she was taking a nap in some secluded bower.

He had begun his survey with the opposite slope, moving his gaze gradually back to the ridge. The slope immediately before him was so acute as to be perpendicular, and presently he found himself gazing straight down to the valley floor, over a thousand feet below. He also found himself gazing straight down upon the naked body of a sleeping girl.

In Hill's mind the height of the hogback shrank drastically in order to accommodate the pattern he had instinctively imposed upon the object of his gaze. Consequently, it was some time before he realized that the young and lovely girl sleeping at the foot of the cliff far exceeded her seeming size.

Other factors delayed his re-acceptance of reality. She was lying there the way any girl, tired from the day's exertions, might lie — one arm shielding her eyes from the sun; one hand lying on her stomach; one leg drawn up, half hiding her pubes. Then there was her wild black hair, her full rose-nippled breasts, her long, slender legs — one simply did not associate such qualities with a giantess.

When the realization finally did take root, he was astonished. The Hujiri, in telling him about Cheida, had failed to mention that she was beautiful. Perhaps to them — in the light of her cruelties — she was not. But it did not matter really — what mattered was that he had found her without having to track her down, had caught her unawares and in a vulnerable position. It was true he could not get off a good shot

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at her from where he lay, but it would be a simple matter for him to descend the hogback and circle out onto the prairie. Once there, he could bring her to her feet with one blast of the Weslich and blow her brains out with a second.

He grinned. It was going to be easy — a lead-pipe cinch. And for this one he would receive not only his usual fee from Galactic Guidance but an additional one from the Hujiri. They had promised him five hundred head of cattle if he succeeded in destroying the monster they had unwittingly brought to life, and five hundred head of cattle would bring him a small fortune on the galactic exchange. The thought of all the elegant boots he could buy made his senses swim; anticipation set his hands to trembling. He experienced only a modicum of self-loathing. The real loathing would come afterward.

He moved back from the edge of the cliff and stood up. Some distance to his left the cliff gave way to more typical terrain. He walked along the ridge top and began circling down to the valley floor. The slope was covered with huge berry bushes, taller than he was. Some of them were broken, their berries scattered on the ground. Once, the hogback seemed to tremble slightly, and he nearly lost his footing. He did not unsling the Weslich till he was almost to the base of the ridge; then he brought it round and held it at ready.

A huge rock formation that he had not noted from above rose up a considerable distance from the cliff. It would provide ideal cover from which to earn his double fee. He backed toward it, eyes fixed on the base of the cliff where he had seen Cheida lying. He found it odd that he could not see her now...Odd? Preposterous! Awareness of the cunning trap into which he had walked as naively as a purblind ant swept over him, and for a while he could not move. When at last paralysis left him and he spun around, the "rock formation" had already come to life and extended a granitelike "ridge" in his direction. Slablike fingers closed round him; the Weslich, knocked from his hands, went flying butt over muzzle toward the base of the cliff. Awesome pressure drove the breath from his lungs, and the sky, so benignly blue a moment ago, went black.

Antistrophe

If we are going to sing of the monsters primitive races create and and if we are going to sing of the professional hunters who hunt them down and kill them, we must realize from the start that essentially we are singing the same song.

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The Hujiri of the planet Primeval invented Cheida ostensibly to frighten their children but actually to frighten themselves. They told ever taller tales of her over their cook fires at night, and as the legend of her grew, she grew too. For maximum effect they located her in an uninhabited valley less than two days' journey from the one in which they raised their crops and grazed their sheep and cattle and made wool. They confined her diet to nuts and berries and wild apples, disqualifying her from ogrehood; but the games they invented for her to play were scarcely less horrifying than anthropophagy would have been. They pretended the world was her playpen and adopted the role of toys for her to play with.

Inevitably they came to believe their own lies. Among primitive people there are no skeptics; when a primitive society believes something, *every single member* believes it; and if there are no outsiders to temper that belief, a paradox is born. On the one hand, we have a whole race of people believing *en masse* that something exists; and on the other hand, we have the bald fact of its nonexistence. Such a paradox cannot be tolerated: reality is forced to relent, and fiction becomes fact.

Cheida appeared on the Hujiri horizon one fine day, strode into their valley and sat down beside one of their villages. She began playing with the houses and the people hiding in them. She turned the houses upside down; she picked the people up by their heels and held them high above the village street and let them drop. She pushed Hujiri wagons back and forth till their axles broke and their wheels fell off and the beasts of burden harnessed to them dropped dead. She pulled up trees by their roots and replanted them in the village square. She dug a channel down the sacred Avenue of Departed Chiefs and rerouted the brook that for centuries had purled along the village outskirts. She knocked down the roundhouse that was the then chief's pride and joy and squashed the shed where the communal farming equipment was stored. Growing bored, she yawned, then lay down full-length and fell asleep, her legs demolishing the few buildings that still remained standing, her head resting on the sacred mound where ten generations of village chiefs lay buried. She slept all afternoon, then got up and found another village and wrecked it, pouting because there were no people in it for her to play with. Finally, after kicking over a silo, she returned to her own valley.

That was her first visit. Others followed. The Hujiri, dismayed, demoralized, disorganized, no

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longer dared live in their own houses. They fled to the woods, to caves in the hills. Cheida tracked them down, resumed her terrible games.

At length word of the Hujiri's plight and its authoress reached the local Galactic Guidance center, whence it was relayed to GG Headquarters. Advanced space exploration had brought to light many superbeings like Cheida and had resulted not only in the creation of an authority to cope with them but in an exhaustive inquiry into Earth's past that had revealed that among primitive Terran peoples fiction had frequently become fact also and that many of the superhuman figures hitherto relegated to mythology fell into the superbeing category and had enjoyed actual — if ephemeral — existence. It was after the slayer of one of them that Galactic Guidance had named its hunters.

At the time of Cheida's rampage, GG had at least a dozen such "Beowulfs" on its payroll. But most of them were in the field, and of those who weren't only one could be located: Norman Hill.

Enter Normal Hill. Slayer of Gogmagogs, Grendels and Fafnirs. Frequenter of stargirl stations, seeker after pain—

Hung-up Norman Hill.

Strophe

There were a number of semilucid intervals during which Hill fancied himself lying in a warm sling from which his head and feet protruded and which was attached to the end of a huge pendulum that was swinging slowly back and forth in an impossibly long arc. Accompanying the swing and inexplicably connected with it were evenly spaced rumbles as of thunder.

He did not open his eyes. To have done so would have dispelled the illusion that was enabling him to retain his sanity.

When complete consciousness finally returned, he became aware first of all of pain. It enveloped his entire thorax but seemed to be most acute in the lower left region. Motion had ceased, and the "sling" had been supplanted by a hard surface of some kind. A wind was blowing at rhythmic intervals, but he could not feel it upon his body.

He lay without moving, letting the memory of what had happened seep slowly into his mind. He kept his eyes tightly closed. Gradually it became clear to him that he had not played his hand quite carefully enough: that Cheida must have spotted the approaching fly-buggy while berrying on the hogback and watched it land from the concealment of the ridge. Then, divining

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the reason for his presence, she had pretended to be asleep long enough to lure him into the valley. It also became clear to him that he had taken the Hujiri too literally when they had described her as an inarticulate child, that she could think, and think well. Moreover, her intuition must be highly developed indeed for her to have perceived that, when he saw her at close range for the first time, his mind would automatically reject her and substitute a more believable phenomenon.

Only after he had safely absorbed the memory did Hill open his eyes.

Night had fallen. He was in a large box. A box with vertical bars on all four sides. Its miasmal stench informed him that he was far from being its first occupant.

Between the bars he saw starlit foliage. Painfully he got to his feet. The bars were branches broken from trees, spaced three inches apart. The floor and the upper section consisted of branches lashed together with vines. The truth struck him: he was in a cage, and the cage was hanging in a tree.

Far below and perhaps a thousand yards distant the waters of a little lake shone in the starlight. He remembered seeing the lake from the hogback. Cheida, evidently, had carried him all the way across the valley.

But where was she now? Paying the Hujiri another visit?

Hearing the rhythmic wind, he lowered his gaze. Beneath the cage and extending partway into the forest was a smooth granite outcropping. He traced its contours out onto the prairie, saw that it joined a far larger outcropping from which two granite tors jutted. From the tors, the outcropping extended northward toward the lake, dividing into two ridges; to the south it terminated in a great granite boulder, heavily wooded on its southern side...

He heard the wind again and saw the magnificent tors rise and fall. No, Cheida wasn't visiting the Hujiri. This was her night to stay home.

Hill taped his ribs as best he could with adhesive strips from the first-aid compartment of his overnight pack. Cheida had not removed it, nor had she removed his carryall belt. His two-way radio, however, was hopelessly smashed. He broke open a carton of concentrated rations and ate silently in the darkness, washing the food down with a few swallows of water from his canteen. Finishing, he put the pack back on and began a systematic survey of his prison.

It netted him nothing. The vines Cheida had used to bind the

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branches together were unbreakable, and he had no knife to cut through them. The bars were firmly secured to both floor and roof, and try as he would, he could not bend them. He did discover a door — not that it did him any good. It consisted of six vertical branches and two horizontal ones and was held tightly in place by means of more vines, those on the right functioning as hinges.

He was wasting his time and he knew it. Even if he could break out of the cage and even if he could make the climb to the branch from which it was suspended, he still wouldn't be able to climb down the sequoia-like trunk to the ground.

He forced himself to lie down, to relax. He slept fitfully through the night, sank into a deep slumber just before dawn. A series of tremendous splashings and loud gurglings awakened him, and opening his eyes and sitting up, he saw that Cheida was in the lake, bathing. He gasped at the sight of her vast water-rivuleted breasts as she stood there waist-deep in the water; he marveled at the black abundance of her hair. Her complexion was fair, like the Hujiri's; the pigmentation of her skin, like theirs, impervious to the sun.

She was combing her hair with a large hayrake taken from one of the villages. The wrought-iron teeth exceeded a foot in length but were spaced too far apart for her to do a good job. Presently she finished and tossed the rake to shore; then she squatted down neck-deep in the water. Her hair spread out like a black kelp bed, losing the modicum of order combing had imposed upon it. She must have felt Hill's gaze upon her, for she looked up at him — and smiled.

She emerged from the lake, drops of water dancing down her arms and shoulders, tumbling down the escarpments of her thighs. Still smiling, she approached the cage. He shrank back against the rear bars. Her face loomed ever larger upon the blue-green-gold canvas of the morning. Seen from the top of the hogback, it had been the face of a beautiful girl; seen from the cage when she had been bathing, it had been the face of a beautiful giantess. But he could no longer see it *in toto*. The eyebrows were like cornices upon which dark thickets grew; the nose appeared as a near-vertical granite ridge. A beauty mark on her cheek had degenerated into a black ulcerous mass; her lips were pink rimrocks beyond which showed the vertical slabs of slightly yellowed teeth.

He saw her right arm rise, the blur of her hand approach. Dumbly he watched her fingers fumble with the vines that held the door —

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Abruptly the door swung open. She reached in and got him and set him gently on the ground.

He looked up at her, up past the pale precipices of her legs, up past the dark coppice of her mons veneris; up past the white expanse of her belly, up between the awesome overhangs of her breasts at her still-smiling face.

Subtly, the smile became a grin.

Goose flesh erupted over his entire body. A thrill of anticipation intermingled with his fear.

She nudged him with her big toe. He began to run.

He ran out of the forest and onto the prairie. The grass sang around his legs. Within him sang the pain of his bruised and broken ribs and another song. He ran in the direction of the distant hogback — not because he expected to reach it, but because logically there was no other direction for him to take. The '02 Weslich lay somewhere in the grass at the hogback's base (unless Cheida had found it, and he did not think she had), and the Weslich represented his one and only hope of living a long life.

The ground jarred beneath his feet, and sudden shade engulfed him. He began running erratically to avoid being scooped up in her enormous palm. But such did not prove to be the nature of the game. Instead, she stepped over him and brought her right foot down squarely in his path. He collided with her heel and fell back bleeding to the ground.

There was a sound as of a thousand power saws biting into a thousand bars of high-alloy steel. It was her laughter.

He groveled in abject ecstasy at her feet. She turned him over with her toes and he got up dutifully and began to run again. He understood the rules of the game now. It was a variant of the game he had played many times before in the stargirl stations. The fact that he had real rather than artificial gravity and real rather than feigned sadism to contend with only made the game more thrilling.

He wondered why it hadn't occurred to him in the beginning that he was psychologically unfit for the Primeval assignment.

He wondered why it hadn't occurred to Galactic Guidance.

Antistrophe

It *had* occurred to Galactic Guidance.

Hill's dossier contained not only the information he had volunteered but the data GG's investigative division had dug up behind his back. The latter far outweighed the former, and it said as plain as day that a mission involving a sadistic giantess would be suicidal for Norman Hill.

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Why, then, had Galactic Guidance dispatched him post-haste to Primeval?

Did they do so because they abhorred his sexual aberration, or did they do so because they saw reflected in it latent aberrations of their own?

Whatever their true motive, their official reason was irreproachable: the Hujiri had been in desperate need of help, and there had been no one to send but Hill —

Hung-up Norman Hill.

Strophe

Hill lay upon his back on the floor of the cage. His body was bruised in a hundred places; at least three of his ribs were broken; blood oozed from his broken nose.

It was midday. He had wanted to keep on playing the game, but Cheida had grown bored and put him back in the cage. Then she had departed. Probably she was visiting the Hujiri, shopping for a new toy to replace him when he wore out.

The thought made him writhe.

Miraculously his pack still clung to his back, his carryall belt still encircled his waist. When his strength began to return he sat up, leaned against the tree-branch bars and ate and drank. Sparingly.

Why sparingly? After today he would have no further need of food and water. By tomorrow he would be dead.

Dead.

That was what he wanted, wasn't it? To be dead?

Wasn't that what he had always wanted whenever he visited a stargirl station? Hadn't he, every time a heavy whore ground a spiked heel into his naked chest, wanted that heel to pierce his heart? Hadn't he, every time the stargirls walked on his naked body in the elegant spiked boots he bought them, wanted death and orgasm to be one?

Yes, that was what he wanted —*at the time.* But not afterward. Afterward, despite the pain, despite the shame, despite the guilt, despite the self-loathing, he knew peace.

He knew peace now. And he did not want to die. Not quite.

A warm wind came up and breathed sporadically down the distant hogback and across the valley floor, and the cage swung gently back and forth, back and forth. For some time he had been staring absently at the little lake. Presently he realized that his gaze had shifted to something lying on the shore. At first he did not consciously identify it. Only gradually did he become cognizant that it was Cheida's "comb".

Even then, he did not for a long while realize why he was staring at it. He kept thinking of the game he and Cheida had played all morning

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long, kept remembering her uncanny timing whenever it was her "move." Part of it was owing to his unvarying rate of speed and to his adherence, after he'd learned the rules, to straight rather than erratic courses. In effect, he had established a pattern, and she had become conditioned to it.

If he were to re-establish it when they next played the game and then suddenly vary it, would not the "move" she had already started to make be completed through sheer momentum?

He knew then why he was staring at the hayrake.

It wasn't much of a card, but it was the only one he had been dealt. When Cheida returned he would play it. Play it for all it was worth.

But he did not play it that day. Cheida did not return till late, and either she was too tired for games or did not care to risk losing him in the gathering darkness. She peered at him through the bars of the cage, the whites of her eyes like pale moons in the night sky of her face. He smelled wild berries on her awesome breath...To his horror he found himself wishing to be set upon the ground, to be prodded by her toe, to begin the game again — not so he could employ his stratagem and flee, but so he could reexperience the bliss of being utterly subject to her will.

He sat perspiring in the darkness after she lay down to sleep. His nose began to bleed again; his broken ribs were jagged peaks in the ragged graph line of his pain. Around him the leaves rustled in the wind of her rhythmic exhalations. He felt suddenly, horribly alone. Alone in the night, alone in eternity; forever, evermore alone —

Antistrophe

He is *not* alone. In the surreal shadows behind him the pages of *Psychopathia Sexualis* flutter in the winds of time, and a Krafft-Ebing company steps upon the stage. Footlights blaze, a *danse macabre* begins. A harlot makes a pirouette, a sadist does a rigadoon, a masochist a minuet. A fetishist waltzes with a shoe, a sodomist with a sheep. Queers dance with queers. And from the wings, Rousseau and Baudelaire look on.

Strophe

Morning found Cheida again bathing in the little lake. From his cage Hill carefully noted where she tossed the hayrake after she finished combing her hair.

He had eaten the rest of his rations and drunk the rest of his water before she arose. While she bathed, he retaped his ribs. He did not bother to put his pack back on. It was useless to him now. He

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detached his empty thermos from his belt. He had already thrown the useless two-way radio away.

It had been useless to begin with. The Primeval GG Center consisted of one man, one modular hut and one fly-buggy, and Hill had borrowed the fly-buggy for his mission.

He expected Cheida to begin where they had left off yesterday. She did not. Instead, after removing him from his cage she waded back into the water and dropped him in the middle of the lake.

He landed on his left side and nearly blacked out from pain. He sank deep, kicked free from his boots and clawed his way back to the surface. He began swimming toward the opposite shore. He knew she would be waiting for him when he got there. She was. Her delighted cachinnation crashed upon his eardrums as she picked him up and waded back into the lake and dropped him into the water once again. This time he surfaced in a dead-man's float, hoping to make her understand that he was not built for this kind of play and that if it were to continue she would have an inanimate toy on her hands.

Either she got the message or had already become bored; at any rate, she picked him up out of the water and deposited him on the grassy shore. He lay there on his right side, breathing heavily. From where he lay he could see her "comb." It was partially hidden by the tall grass. He had seen similar rakes in the ruins of the Hujiri villages he had visited during his reconnaissance. They had long wooden tongues with which to attach them to yoked oxen. This one had no tongue. Probably Cheida had broken it off.

She did not let him rest for long, and presently she nudged him with her big toe. He groveled in the grass at her feet, fighting an impulse to kiss them. She laughed delightedly and nudged him again. This time he got up and began to run. He headed toward the trees, knowing he would never reach them. He did not. Her right foot descended in his path and he crashed into her heel, toppled backward to the ground. He fought back an impulse to grovel again, screaming to himself that he must kill this outsize whore or be killed himself; then he got up and ran out onto the prairie.

As he ran, he counted his steps. Her right foot descended in his path again. Again he collided with her heel, but managed to cushion the shock by turning sideways. He got up and set off again, once more counting his steps. Her right foot descended on the same count as before.

He was well out on the prairie.

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Still counting, he began circling back toward the lake. He was divided into two parts: one part wanted to go on playing the game; the other wanted desperately to reach the hayrake and bring the game to an end.

But merely reaching the rake would not be enough. He must reach it at exactly the right moment.

Cheida was laughing almost continuously now, and forest birds, flushed from the trees by the terrifying sound, hung high in the benign blue sky...He could see them clearly as he lay on his back for the sixth consecutive time. He had estimated the last three "moves" carefully, and the next one should bring him to the rake.

He lay there, breathing heavily. Cheida squatted above him, looking down into his face. Her knees were a pair of granite knolls, her dugs wreaths of wild red roses. Her hair hung down around her face like the black streamers of a summer storm.

He got up again and began running toward the rake, pacing himself carefully. The soles of his socks had worn through, and his feet were bleeding. He did not even feel them. When he was halfway to the rake, the ground trembled from the impact of her first step. He continued to run at the same even pace; then, ten feet from his goal, he doubled his speed. Reaching the rake, he raised it on edge, so that its teeth pointed toward the sky. Cheida's enormous foot was already descending, the whole of her massive weight behind it. He held onto the rake till the last second, then let go and jumped to one side.

THUDDDD!

Her scream sent the forest birds winging far out over the prairie. The waters of the little lake quivered in the morning sunlight. She sat down with an earth-shaking crash and, crooking her right leg over her left knee, seized the imbedded rake and pulled it from the sole of her foot. She screamed again. Hill expected her to throw it at him and stood where he was, prepared to dodge. But she did not. Instead, she laid it to one side and looked at him in terrible contemplation. He waited no longer. He was off over the prairie, running.

Antistrophe

Run, Hill, run.

Run run run.

Run from your twisted yesterdays; run from your tortured tomorrows.

Run from the mother that begot you; run from the mother that forgot you.

Run, Hill, run.

Run run run!

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Strophe

Hill came at length to the anfractuous forest that bordered both sides of the river, and entered the coolness of the trees. When he reached the river, he halted on the bank. His legs were a pair of wooden stilts, his feet two concrete blocks. He sank down on the grassy bank to get his breath —

Only to leap instantly erect when he felt the bank shudder beneath him.

He waited for the tremor of her next footstep. Almost a minute passed before it came, and it was almost imperceptible. Good. She was limping badly. There was an excellent chance he could reach the hogback before she overtook him, a fair chance he could find the Weslich in time to save his life.

He waded into the river, began swimming when the water reached his chest. The pain of his damaged ribs was so acute that he could barely move his arms, but at last he crawled up onto the opposite bank. He lay face downward, taking in great lungfuls of the morning air, expelling them in huge sobs. A tremor brought him to his bleeding feet, and he reentered the forest at a stumbling trot.

Through the forest and out onto the prairie again. He could see the hogback distinctly now. The cliff he had so confidently looked down from less than two days ago stood out starkly from the greenness of the rest of the ridge. He pointed himself toward it, ran on. From behind him came the crash of falling trees. Cheida had reached the forest.

She screamed at him, but he did not look back. Little animals erupted from the ground and ran with him toward the hogback. He was so weak that he nearly fell when the next major tremor came. The minor followed a long time afterward.

Suddenly the sunlight gave way to shadow, and before him he made out the ragged outline of her head; on either side, the shape of her huge shoulders. However, the sun was still low in the sky, and her shadow was long; she was still a considerable distance behind him. The cliff loomed tantalizingly close; he pushed himself toward it. Behind him, Cheida screamed again. Her shadow had not yet reached the hogback, and the grass along the base was still bathed in morning sunshine. He scanned the grass as he ran, and presently his eyes caught a faint gleam of metal near the foot of the cliff. It *had* to be the Weslich. He came upon it still running, did not pause but snatched it up and veered sharply to the right and started up the slope where the berry bushes grew. To bag her at such close range he needed all the height he could get.

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He had not climbed far before he felt the warm wind of her breath upon his back. He turned, then, and fitted the butt of the Weslich to his shoulder and braced his feet against a shale ledge. She loomed awesomely above him, obscuring the morning sky. Her hair was like a black thundercloud, her arms were raised, her fingers curved into massive claws. Her face was in shadow, but he could see her cold pitiless eyes. Suddenly he remembered how a long time ago he had watched a little girl vent her rage upon a doll she had taken a dislike to. First she had pulled out its hair; then she had torn off its arms; then she had gripped it by its feet and slammed it repeatedly on the floor till finally the head had fallen off and rolled into a corner.

He had already pointed the muzzle of the Weslich at Cheida's forehead. He had merely to squeeze the trigger. To his horror, he found that he could not. He gazed helplessly up at the vast magnificence of her body; he remembered the thrilling game they had played. What stargirl in what orbital brothel could ever match her terrible tyranny? What boots could ever symbolize the primitive imperiousness of her naked feet?

Screaming with rage, she reached down to pluck him from the bank. He lowered the muzzle of the Weslich till it pointed at her neck, closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

She fell forward onto the slope of the hogback. Slowly; there was plenty of time for him to get out of the way. Her hair spread out around her head and shoulders, covering bushes and little trees. He

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found wild flowers growing farther up the bank and picked them, blue ones, yellow ones, orange, and placed them in her hair. The ground was turning red from the blood pouring from the huge hole the Weslich had blown in her throat. His feet were red as he climbed the slope a second time and picked more wild flowers for her hair, red with her blood and his own. He sat beside her all afternoon. Toward nightfall he climbed the hogback for the last time and descended the opposite slope. The fly-buggy was unharmed; either Cheida had forgotten it or had disdained to play with it. He got behind the controls and lifted it into the night sky. The stars came out; peace lay upon the land. *I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense...*

The starlit land drifted by beneath him, the fields and the streams, the hills and the little outlying places pale with flowers... After selling his five hundred head of Hujiri cattle he would return to Earth and collect his fee from Galactic Guidance. He knew how he would spend the money. He knew how he would spend the rest of his life. He would frequent the stargirl stations as he had never frequented them before; like a man condemned, he would search forever for her ghost among the whores.

Antistrophe

Her ghost among the whores.

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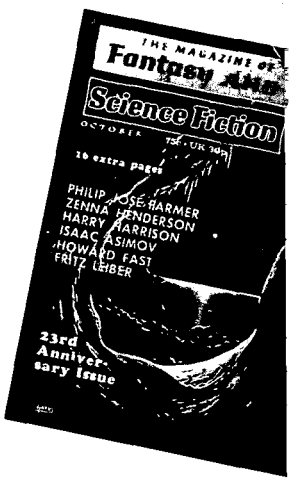

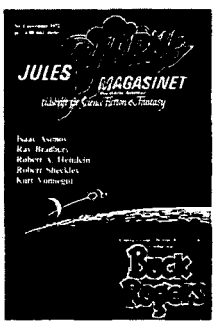

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